TOUCHDOWN!

HAROLD M. SHERMAN

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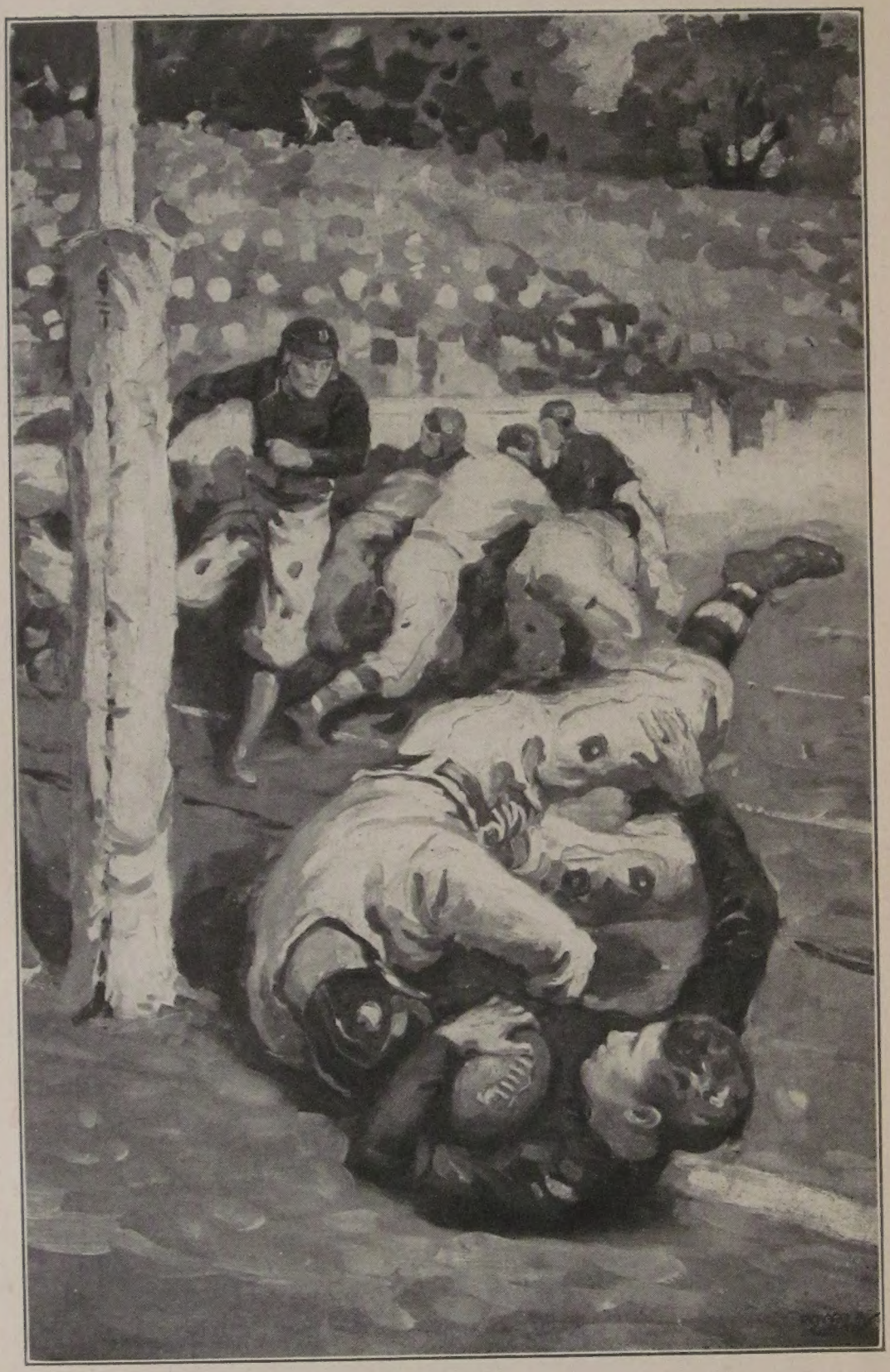

"TOUCHDOWN!"

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BY

HAROLD M. SHERMAN

AUTHOR OF
ONE MINUTE TO PLAY

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To

THOMAS ARTHUR SHERMAN

My Brother

And to All Younger Brothers

—The Finest of Good Fellows—

This Book Is Most Sincerely Dedicated

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TOUCHDOWN!

CHAPTER I

FRIENDLY RIVALRY

"WHERE are we going? Does anyone know?"

This was a question that might well have been asked some hours before. There had been mystery in this long bike trip from the beginning. In the first place, Stuffy Owen, Pepper Lawton and Brick Mitchell, ringleaders in what was to be a camping venture, had assured the bunch that they knew of a perfectly ideal spot.

"Trust us!" they had said in response to all inquiries. "We ran onto the camp site last year. It's absolutely the finest in the state! Borders on Cedar Lake . . . right in the wilds . . . nobody near . . . !" Are game to follow?"

Ten members, comprising most of the first string squad of Milford High's football team, had answered a vigorous "Yes!" to the query, intrigued at that moment by the enthusiasm of

Milford's Big Three, youths who had starred last season in the infield and backfield of the school's baseball and football teams. Surely these fellows knew what they were talking about!

Now, however, with the sun beating down, mercilessly hot . . . and the party having been on the way since early morning until high noon . . . faith in the self-appointed leadership of the Three began to wane.

"They've lost us!" wailed Beef Mellon, sliding off his bicycle at the foot of a great hill. Beef, veteran center and captain-elect, was the heaviest member of the team. It had been real labor for him, propelling his two hundred and thirty-one pounds over rough and dusty country roads.

"I'll agree we're in the wilds all right," continued Beef, calling a halt to the procession of bicyclists. "Looks like nobody's traveled this route for days! A wonder we haven't blown all our tires! Gosh, I've bumped up and down so much on my seat that I won't sit comfortably for a week! But where's it getting us? That's what I want to ask! If these birds have put up a job on us . . . oh, boy—what they've got coming to them!"

The Big Three, under fire, looked at one

another and grinned. Stuffy assumed the rôle of spokesman.

"Well, didn't you guys say you wanted to take a trip that would help put you in shape for football season?" he replied with evident enjoyment of their discomfiture. "We didn't guarantee macadamized roads when we started out . . . or shade all the way . . . or no hills to climb . . .!"

"But you *did* guarantee to take us some place!" protested Beef, saturating a handkerchief with beads of perspiration from his forehead. "And we're getting to NO place fast!"

"If you'll just keep on to the top of this hill, . . . " started Pepper, soothingly.

"Yeah, that's what you've said the last three hills! What kind of a mountain climber do you think I am? . . . It's dangerous to try working off all my excess weight in one day!"

"That's right, Beef!" laughed Merle Conway, veteran right half, "I don't blame you for objecting! What's that old adage—'You can drive a mule to water but an *elephant* must be led'?"

"Elephant!" snorted Beef, registering mock indignation. "You've got that wrong—*pencil!*"

"Draw the line if you want to!" kidded Merle, "but I still maintain that elephant fits your case much better than . . .!"

The right half ducked quickly to avoid a handful of sand.

"WATER!" muttered Beef. "You can drive a mule to . . .! You *said* something when you mentioned WATER! Gee, I'm so dry I can't swallow!"

Brick Mitchell, third member of Milford's Big Three, gave Beef an amused glance.

"There's a wonderful well of spring water at the top of the hill," he informed.

"What's that?"

"There *is?*"

"Which side of the road?"

Thus did the entire squad suddenly display interest!

"We'll tell you when we get to the top," broke in Stuffy, "so nobody'll get killed in the rush!"

"And you can see from there just where we're going to camp!" enlightened Pepper.

"Which ought to make you fellows ashamed that you didn't have any more faith in us!" chided Brick.

"Huh!" snorted Beef, realizing that the

shaft was directed at him, "a steep hill like this is enough to make a person lose faith in anybody!"

The territory into which the members of Milford's Big Three had led their fellow players was, without question, the roughest and wildest existing in Nugent County. It was late August, just two weeks before the reopening of school, a time of year when foliage was thickest and when native undergrowth was highest. Great clumps of bushes lined the little traveled road; behind these, ravine-like banks were buried in deep tufts of wild grasses and plants; and, still beyond this wilderness of greenery, stood an unbroken wall of towering trees—a small forest primeval which had somehow managed to resist, at this late day, the onslaught of civilization. Here, indeed, was a bit of country that any group of boys had every reason to rave about! Almost inconceivable to think of such a spot so close to home . . . and yet, a spot so little known and seldom visited.

"Can't ride a bicycle up here!" panted Joe Kline, left tackle, as the climb commenced.

"All you can do to *push* it up!" grunted Jim Hemming, right end.

"She's the highest hill in the state," advised Stuffy. "Folks call her 'Grand View.' She's *grand*, all right! Gives you a real thrill on the summit!"

"The only thing that'll give me a thrill'll be the sight of that spring water!" retorted Beef. "After that I'm going to look for a shady spot and, camp or no camp, I'm going to lay my weary carcass down and tell it to rest. Let the horizon lines fall where they may!"

Fifteen long minutes were required for the straggling band of bicyclists to trundle their wheels up the winding, narrow road which, near the crest of the hill, became almost completely overshadowed with drooping branches. The abnormally large growth of the underbrush, together with the steepness of ascent, kept them from seeing what was beyond and it was a totally unexpected moment when the top was reached, unfolding abruptly a scene which caused the squad to gasp in sheer awe.

"Wow! What a sight!" exclaimed Beef, excitedly, forgetting entirely his vow to heed nothing but the quenching of his thirst and the resting of his bones. "Look at that lake, will you? Gee, we're up so high it looks like

you could almost make a running dive into it from here!"

Straight ahead, and considerably beneath them, Cedar Lake glistened in the rays of the midday sun, reflecting the bright green of the cedars from which it took its name. Below was beautiful, rolling, wooded country, with here and there stretches of open space . . . one space in particular, skirting the lake, appearing as smooth as though it might have been one of the greens of a golf links. This open area shaded from green to white as it approached the sparkling body of water.

"Beach!" cried Merle, with enthusiasm. "Boy, what a place for our camp!"

"That's IT!" said the Big Three in unison. "Now—do we know where we're going? That's the whitest, softest sand down there you ever stuck your toes in . . . and there's a swell spot back in the cedars to pitch these lean-to's we've brought along . . .!"

"WATER!" yelled Beef, suddenly recalling his thirst. "Where's that spring?"

"Oh, it's off here to the right," directed Stuffy. "Follow us—we'll show you!"

With the Big Three leading the way, the rest of the squad trailed, single file, off the road

. . . up a slight incline, through some bushes, into a shaded, mossy path and—hello . . .!

Stuffy, in the lead, stopped short. Pepper and Brick, just behind, paused, startledly. Up ahead was the spring, as they had discovered it the summer before, but surrounding it now was a crowd . . . a crowd of strange fellows! Eight . . . ten . . . twelve . . . *fifteen* of them!

It would be hard to say which band was the more surprised. Both stared at one another unbelievingly. Each had thought themselves to be the only persons within miles of this location.

"Jiminy whiz!" cried Stuffy, in an undertone. "If I'm not mistaken, there's Tim Norton. Fellows, it's a gang from Reedland!"

The news was electric. Reedland! Tim Norton! Names of dire meaning to Milford! Reedland, county seat of Lafayette, adjoining county to Nugent, of which Milford was the county seat! Reedland and Milford, rivals in everything since their founding . . . rivals in population, building, business, schools and—sports! Tim Norton, latest thorn in

Milford's athletic hide . . . Reedland's triple threat football star who had all but carried Milford down to defeat in the big game last year had it not been for the flashing play of the Big Three! Tim Norton had left the field that memorable day, vowing vengeance.

"We'll get you next year!" he had promised, and Milford—clutching to victory by the narrowest of margins—knew that Reedland's smashing fullback spoke a promise which might be realized. Reedland High's power was always to be feared . . . more so during the years that the eleven boasted such a star as Tim Norton! Thank heaven that Milford could retaliate with three players of the caliber of Stuffy Owen at fullback; Pepper Lawton at quarterback, and Brick Mitchell at left half. Milford High's Big Three! It had taken the combined results of their work in the backfield to exceed the damage done by the mighty Tim Norton in last season's great clash with Reedland. They had only been Freshmen then . . . but, oh—how they had acquitted themselves! Already, though football season was still a month and more away, ardent Reedland fans were talking of what might be

expected of the new team . . . and especially the three chums who had won athletic fame together.

Tim Norton and other members of the Reedland bunch were hardly less quick in recognizing members of the Milford group than they were them. A murmur of comment ran through the rival crowds. Then Norton stepped forward.

"Greetings!" he called, cordially.

"Greetings yourself!" retorted Stuffy, advancing to shake hands. "What in blazes you fellows doing here?"

"Same thing you birds intend doing!" snapped Tim. "We've come to camp!"

"Why don't you stay in your own county?" joshed Pepper. "Why pick on us? Can't you leave our territory alone?"

"Where can you find a place like this in our county?" rejoined Tim. "This is the one thing you can beat us in and we're willing to admit it. In fact, we're willing to do more than that—we're willing to take advantage of it!"

The rival groups met and mingled. Many of the fellows, finding those who had directly opposed them on the gridiron, good-naturedly recalled old times.

"How's it come we didn't see any sign of you on our way up the hill?" asked Beef Mellon, perplexed.

"Probably because we hid our wheels at the bottom and came up a path," answered Tim, grinning.

"How long you been here?"

"About half an hour."

"How long you been on the road?"

"Left Reedland seven yesterday morning."

"Huh! How long you expect to camp?"

"Couple of weeks!"

"Say!" exploded Beef, "isn't there anything you guys planned to do that we didn't?"

Tim shrugged his shoulders, laughingly.

"I don't know. Keep on asking us. You may find something!"

But Beef surrendered with a hopeless gesture.

"There's only one more thing I want to ask," he said, a pathetic note to his voice.

"And that is . . .?" invited Tim.

"Is there any of that well water left?"

"PLENTY!"

The Reedland crowd parted ranks, permitting the parched Beef to get through. He was followed by most of the Milford bunch, all of

whom felt certain pangs of thirst from hours of pedaling in the hot sun.

"Some grind to get here, wasn't it?" said Pepper, pleasantly.

"Oh, I don't know. Can't say that we noticed it much!" replied Tim, easily. "You see *we're* in pretty good condition!"

It was the old rivalry cropping out again. Here were two groups of fellows, ordinarily brought together only on the field of battle. Now it began to look as though this rivalry was to be extended in other channels. If Reedland should camp near Milford . . .! Well, it was dead certain there'd be something doing every day in the week, not to mention at night!

"Ever been around here before?" asked Brick of the Reedland crowd.

"Not any further than this," replied Scotty Burke, their quarterback. "We got a look at that country below, though, and decided we'd come back again when we could stay longer. You been down there?"

Brick nodded.

"Just us three," he replied, motioning to Stuffy and Pepper.

"How'd you find it—up to expectations?"

"Wonderful . . .!" started Brick.

Beef jabbed him in the back. "Soft pedal, you poor nut! We don't want these guys hanging around!"

". . . except," added Brick, taking Beef's cue, "we never hit a place with more mosquitoes. Whoppers, too! When they bit, the bites swelled up like eggs! Of course you have to watch out for snakes . . . and it gets darn hot down there where the breeze doesn't catch you!"

"What are you talking about?" demanded Stuffy, breaking in. "We never had any trouble with . . .!" Brick's wink came just in time. "Oh, yes—I guess we did, too! I almost forgot! Gee, I can feel those mosquito bites yet!" Stuffy took to scratching his arms and legs gingerly. His antics, however, were not sufficient to cover up. The Reedland fellows laughed heartily.

"Yeah!" said Tim Norton, dryly. "Sounds pretty tough. So terrible that I think we'd better head for there right away. Let's go, gang!"

There was a general movement along the path toward the road.

"Nothing doing!" exploded Beef. "You can't

shake us that easy! We're traveling in the same direction!"

"Well, all I can say is that you'll have to travel *some* if you expect to keep pace with us!" rejoined Tim over his shoulder. "First gang to the lake gets choice of camp site!"

Because the Reedland crowd had left their wheels at the base of the hill and the heaviest of their supplies, they were equipped to make much better speed. They had purposely refrained from making the laborious carry up the hill due to their unfamiliarity with the region, preferring to do some reconnoitering first. Then, if no favorable location were found, much tedious work would have been saved.

Not to be outdone. Milford quickly decided to leave the bulk of their things at the top of the hill and descend to the country near the lake on the heels of the rival crowd who obviously were bent on staking a claim to such of the region as they liked.

"Someone ought to stay here to guard our stuff," suggested Stuffy, "How about you, Beef? You said you wanted a rest!"

"Not when duty calls!" sniffed the ponderous Milford captain. "Do you think I'm going to let that Reedland bunch throw us for a

loss? No, sir! I'm needed at the front! Fitzgerald, you're elected to stand watch!"

Morris Fitzgerald, substitute quarterback, accepted the order with a salute.

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"We're thirteen to fifteen as it is!" continued Beef, excitedly. "OW! . . . I didn't count us before! THIRTEEN! There's a bad break at the start! Keep your eyes peeled, Morris, old boy! We're in for a hot afternoon!"

Though Milford was under way within ten minutes following the abrupt departure of Reedland, so swift had been the rival crowd's descent that there was no sound or sign of them. At places the slope down the hillside toward the lake was even more precipitous than had been the climb up the other side. Haste brought numerous falls, dislodged stones and sand, causing minor landslides; and raised clouds of dust which proved particularly annoying to those in the rear. The Big Three, having once traversed the route, led the way. But, due to the heavy underbrush lining the road, it was only at random spots that such glimpses could be had of the surrounding country as had been possible at the summit.

"Cheer up, fellows, we're almost there!" encouraged Stuffy, as he paused momentarily at a bend to wave the stragglers on.

"Almost *where?*" gasped Beef.

"To the halfway mark!"

"Suffering cats! *I'm* almost in!"

"It's more gradual from here on. Hurry up! I'll bet we've gained on Reedland so far. We've got to catch 'em before they get to the bottom or they'll lose us!"

The rush continued pell-mell. To an outsider it would have looked like a life and death matter. Such breakneck flight would only seem justified by attempt at escape from some dire calamity . . . and, if an outsider had been there to see, he would probably have taken to his heels without question, joining the madly dashing youths . . . for similar sights have been known to create stampedes.

It was, while tearing headlong, that Milford suddenly came to the end of the road and a second encounter with Reedland. The meeting was purely one of good fortune because Reedland, after having put forth strenuous efforts to outdistance Milford, had brought up unexpectedly against a high wire fence, topped with barb! Red-faced, the two opposing forces, looked at one another and grinned, sheepishly.

All their efforts for naught. Each, for what was to have been gained, might as well have saved their breath and their energy.

"Well, what do you know about this!" cried Pepper, looking around. "This is something new! Wasn't any fence here last summer! This road went straight through that little field and clear on down to the lake! Look at that sign!"

Everyone looked but Beef. He, too disgusted for words, lay flat on his back, breathing heavily and staring up at the hot summer sky.

"I knew it was going to turn out like this!" he mumbled. "Had a sneaking hunch we shouldn't have come all the way here just on the Big Three's authority! And then to have thirteen in the party . . . ! No hope!"

The imposing sign carried the following wording:

NO TRESPASSING!
THIS MEANS YOU

Any individual or individuals caught trespassing on this property will be promptly apprehended and prosecuted.

EDWIN KIRBY
Owner.

"Looks kind of final, doesn't it?" remarked Tim Norton, with a glance at the Milford crowd. "Too bad! We were all set to give you the run of your lives, too!"

Beef, glowering up from his reclining position, made reply. "As far as I'm concerned, you can put it down in your notebooks that you've given us a run already! Gee, when I think of climbing that hill again . . .!"

This thought, from the expression on various faces, was not particularly enjoyable to any.

"And here we'd counted on a dip in that lake!" moaned Tim Norton. "That's the trouble with lakes nowadays. Somebody's always buying up all the ground around 'em so you can't get within half a mile of the water!"

"Hold on!" called Brick, catching sight of a figure which suddenly emerged from the woods beyond the fence. "Who's *that?*"

All eyes turned in the direction indicated.

"Gee! Looks like a bum!"

The stranger stood a moment, evidently sizing up the crowd of young men who lined the fence. Then he came across the field slowly, toward them.

"He's a tramp, sure!" deduced Tim. "Watch me have some fun with him!" Making a mega-

phone of his hands, Tim shouted: "HEY, MISTER! CAN'T YOU READ? YOU'RE LIABLE TO ARREST!" With that he pointed at the sign.

The stranger, now approaching so that his features could be distinguished, shook his head amusedly. He was roughly attired and of medium build. A stubble of beard covered his face.

"Nothing to worry about, boys! Nobody on these premises but me!"

"Yes, but who are you?" asked Stuffy, dubiously.

"Oh, I'm the custodian!"

"What?" gasped Tim Norton, staring. "Well—no wonder!"

The grizzled countenance of the stranger relaxed into a smile.

"Say!" continued Tim, urgently, "you're just the man we're looking for . . . that is—*part* of us!" He turned and made a sweep of the hand, including only the Reedland group. "You see . . . we got here first . . . and we've come to ask permission to camp on this property!"

"Hey!" cried Beef, sitting up, "wait a minute! Those guys are from Lafayette County.

We're *home products!* You ought to favor us!"

The custodian raised his hand.

"Sorry! I'm not in position to favor either side. You'd have to see Mr. Kirby for that."

"Where's *he?*" asked Pepper, eagerly.

"He lives in Baldwin," informed the stranger.

A chorus of groans greeted this information. Baldwin was forty miles distant, in the northernmost part of Nugent County, not far from the boundary of Lafayette. The town was familiar to both Reedland and Milford for it was on the most direct route between them.

"Well, gee," said Tim, somewhat balked. "Do you know of a telephone near here?"

The custodian nodded.

"Yes, Mr. Kirby has one in the old log house but I can tell you now it wouldn't do you any good to call. He'd have to see you personally."

"Just why is that?" inquired Brick. "Couldn't we tell him . . .?"

"The reason's this," broke in the stranger, "Mr. Kirby was glad to grant camping privileges up to last year . . . but it finally got so that these privileges were terribly

abused. Campers didn't clean up after themselves, they took to cutting down virgin timber and didn't take care in the building of fires. Mr. Kirby was naturally forced to protect himself by having this fence put up and refusing further use of his property!"

Milford and Reedland eyed each other glumly.

"Then I guess there's no use in our trying to see him," deduced Tim Norton. "We'd only get the grand turn-down for our trouble!"

"I wouldn't exactly say that," encouraged the custodian. "Mr. Kirby doesn't mind extending privileges to people he knows are going to be responsible. Chances are, if you approached him in the right way, he'd let you in . . . that is, one or the other of you!"

"Meaning you don't think he'd stand for two different crowds being on his property at the same time?"

The custodian shrugged his shoulders.

"Maybe so. Maybe not! Two factions usually cause too much devilment!"

Tim Norton grinned.

"Yeah . . . and seeing as how we're really two rival football teams in disguise, I'm here to say that Mr. Kirby is a *wise* man!"

The custodian raised his brows, interestedly.

"That so? . . . Just where are you boys from, may I ask?"

"We're from Milford . . . they're from Reedland!" announced Stuffy.

"Oh, I believe I've read of your doings before! Well, boys, I wish I could hold out more hope for you . . . but if you'd care to get in touch with Mr. Kirby on the chance of his giving you permission, I'll be glad to let you in here when you can show me something from him in writing!"

"Thanks!" answered Stuffy. "We'll think about it!"

"Come on, bunch!" snapped Tim Norton. "No use sticking around here! So long, stranger! We may be back! You never can tell!"

With that, both groups did an about face and started the long climb up the hill. There was no effort made at speed this time. The custodian stood, watching the boys out of sight. At the bend in the road they turned and waved at him. He waved back, then turned on his heel and walked slowly across the field, disappearing into the woods.

"Gee!" exclaimed Pepper, looking after the lone figure. "What a lonely existence that guy

must lead! If I was him I'd have let us in, regardless of orders, just for company!"

"Seemed like a nice enough bird!" commented Brick.

"Yeah, as hermits go, he's not so bad!" admitted Stuffy.

At the top of the hill, Morris Fitzgerald, left in charge of bicycles and supplies, was found fast asleep. The Reedland crowd, coming upon him first, had some fun by pouncing on him suddenly.

"Now we've got you!" thundered Tim Norton.

"HELP!" yelled Morris, coming to his senses, wild-eyed.

"A fine guard *you* are!" reprimanded Beef, plodding up, both sides enjoying his evident embarrassment. "Just for that I'm going to have the wind let out of your tires!"

"What's happened?" inquired Morris, sheepishly.

"We've both been defeated," advised Tim. "That is—for the time being! . . . But I hereby declare a state of real warfare from this moment on! So, take warning! We're going to get the right to camp down there and all Milford can't stop us!"

Beef stared at Tim, unbelieving.

"You don't mean you're going clear to . . . to Baldwin?"

"We're going anywhere we have to go to get what we're after!" answered Tim, challengingly. "But where we go is our business! Good-by, Milford!"

And with that the Reedland crowd was off down the other side of the hill on the double-quick!

"Jumping, long-whiskered grasshoppers!" swore Beef. "Fellows, what are we going to do about this?"

"Don't let 'em get away with it!" replied Stuffy, with sudden enthusiasm. "They're out to beat us and we're quitters if we lie down! It's up to us to lay plans for reaching this guy Kirby! Reedland's going to try to keep us from doing it, of course . . . you heard 'em throw down the gauntlet! We're picking it up, gang—right now! Let's see the old fighting spirit! If *anybody* camps here, *who's* it going to be?"

"Milford!"

"*Who?*"

"MILFORD!"

"That's the way to talk! Out after 'em bunch!"

CHAPTER II

THE RACE TO BALDWIN!

Reedland had the jump on Milford. With their wheels at the base of the hill, they were on and off before Milford had even started trundling her bicycles down to where actual riding was possible. But if getting the jump held an advantage, the winner was more apt to be determined on the side of endurance for it was no easy jaunt which lay ahead. Baldwin—forty miles away! Thank heaven for the good state road only three miles distant! Getting to that road would be the hardest. And then the long, hot grind would stretch on . . . and on . . . like cyclists in a motordrome except that there'd be nothing circular about the track . . . no banked turns . . . nothing but the scorching strip of tarvia or concrete . . . with constant caution necessary to avoid speeding automobilists who always showed scant regard for those on two-wheel vehicles!

Tim Norton, big though he was, took the lead over the bumpy excuse for a road as the Reedland party started pedaling themselves from the wilderness.

"Let's travel now, gang!" he directed, "and put as much distance between Milford and us as we can right here! They'll never catch us when we get to pavement if we do!"

Valuable moments were taken up by Milford in deciding whether to carry all their equipment or discard some of it at a marked spot so that, with lightened burdens, more speed could be made. The Big Three thought that everything possible should be done without.

"Nothing stirring!" argued Beef. "What if we *lose?* What if Mr. Kirby won't let anybody camp on his property? Then we'd have to come clear back here to pick up our things! Not on your left elbow! I wouldn't go through this again for the Panama Canal! Don't see what got into Reedland anyway! Who said we wanted to compete for a camping place? Boy, this is going to be lots tougher than playing 'em at football! In football you at least get some 'time-outs.' But this contest is *non-stop!*"

It was fully half an hour later that Milford

reached the rough roadway beneath the hill and set out in pursuit of fast-traveling Reedland. Beef's argument had won out. Milford was carrying all supplies. There were packs on backs, bags tied to handlebars, rolls fastened above back mudguards behind the seat, and also pockets which bulged. In addition to this, there was the warmth of the day and the fact that Milford had already traversed many miles in making the trip from town to the site at which they had hoped to camp.

"Do you suppose Reedland expects to make Baldwin by night?" Stuffy, up ahead, turned to ask of Pepper and Brick.

"Search me!"

"Probably are! I think we should keep going till we overtake them at any rate. If we don't overtake them it's almost a sure sign they're still in front," said Brick.

"I thought maybe they might decide to pull off near Baldwin . . . camp over night . . . and shoot in early in the morning," figured Stuffy. "It's past two o'clock now and it's bound to be late when we arrive!"

"What if they'd hail an auto and send one of their fellows in that way?" suggested Pepper.

"Say, there's an idea!" called Beef, who'd

pedaled himself up near the front, curious to learn what the Big Three were talking about. "Why can't *we* do that? Then the rest of us can park in the shade near the side of the road and wait developments! Great!"

Stuffy, laughing, shook his head.

"No. Tim Norton plays fair. We're traveling by bicycle . . . so is Reedland. And that's the way they'll fight us. That's the only way there'd be any sport to it. After all, we wouldn't be trying so darn hard to beat Reedland out if we weren't getting a kick from it!"

"Getting a kick from it?" wailed Beef. "By night I won't be able to lift a leg, let alone kick!"

Once on the main highway, an already tired bunch of Milfordites bent low on the handlebars and hit a pace which they hoped could be kept up for an indefinite period. They swallowed much dust as whizzing autoists flashed past, the journey being quite unlike their morning ride from Milford which had been made more in the cool of the day and when fewer travelers were on the road. It wasn't long until those in the bicycle caravan wore coats of mirky yellow . . . the dry dust settling upon them in clouds. Its effect on their faces

was weird for the perspiration trickled through the dust layers in streaky rivulets.

"Never again!" choked Merle Conway, ninth in line, "I've taken in more dust now than a vacuum sweeper and we've only gone twelve miles!"

"Try riding backwards!" suggested Jim Hemming, who still possessed his sense of humor.

"Oh, let me ride a bicycle by the side of the road and let the rest of the world go by!" paraphrased Joe Kline, impishly.

"May you fall into a ditch!" puffed Fitzgerald.

"Save all that hot air, you guys!" Stuffy called back. "You'll need it!"

"I want WATER!" yelled Beef. "I'm so dry I can't swallow again!"

"Take a spin back to that spring on the top of Grand View Hill," directed Pepper. "We'll wait for you! *We won't even slow up!*"

Beef took a hand from the bars to shake his fist, struck a rut in the road with his wheel at the same time, and almost pitched off on his head.

Seventeen miles from their starting point, the cycling tourists passed an air port and beacon

light on the route of the United States Mail. The large white hangars gleamed in the sun which had now sunk low in the west. On the runway were several planes and aviators out, tuning them up. There was a great temptation to stop and look on, especially after Stuffy's saying that his father knew Major Curran, the commandant of the field.

"He and dad used to go to school together," advised Stuffy. "Dad's promised some time to take me over and arrange for a flight."

"Maybe he could work us all in," said Jim Hemming, hopefully. "Take us over, one by one, and pass us off as his sons!"

Groans from all within hearing! A half hour's silence followed, every member of the party paying strict attention to the business of clicking off the miles. This would be a day not soon forgotten.

At Old Mission, a little village, the state road became the main street. Here the Milford squad made a brief stop for the purpose of freshening up, giving leg muscles a temporary rest, and quenching dry throats. Anxious inquiries were directed at villagers regarding Reedland.

"Did you see another crowd of fellows go

through here to-day?" asked Stuffy of the proprietor of the Yellow Garage.

" 'Bout an hour ago!" was the answer.

"Did they stop?"

"I don't know . . . Yes, I guess they did! Over at the hardware! Seems like I seen 'em there a minute. I was right busy at the time!"

Stuffy turned back to the group.

"Hardware?" he repeated, thoughtfully. "Some of them must have been in trouble . . . or else . . .!" His eyes widened. "Come on, fellows . . . we've got to find out what they were doing there!"

The clerk in the small, dingy-appearing hardware store was an old man with spectacles. He was almost totally bald and quite deaf.

"Well!" said he, when the Milford crowd swarmed in, "so you're back again, be you? What you want now—*more tacks?*"

"TACKS?" cried the bunch, involuntarily.

The store-keeper looked his surprise.

"How's that?" he chirped, in a high-pitched voice, cupping a hand behind one ear.

"Uh huh!" said Stuffy, aside, "I had a real hunch, didn't I? Fellows, we've got to be darn careful from here on." Then, to the blinking

old man: "No, uncle! We don't want tacks *this time!* What we'd like is a couple of tubes of *Never-Leak!*"

The Milfordites grinned and the store-keeper, not understanding, figured out the remark to be a joke.

"You've got a couple of boobs who never eat?" he repeated. "Well this ain't no place for 'em! We *bolts* our food here!"

By the howl which went up the store-keeper was certain he had gotten off something extremely witty. He laughed heartier than any. Stuffy took him by the arm, leading him to a counter on which were a few bicycle supplies.

"Not never-eat!" he shouted, "NEVER-*LEAK!* A COUPLE OF TUBES!"

The store-keeper's face sobered, then flushed.

"Oh!" he said, and started laughing. "Well, it was a good joke anyway! Sure I got some Never-Leak! Over here! Not much call for it . . . only couple of tubes left. Had 'em in stock a long time. Hope they work all right!"

"We're hoping we won't have to use them!" yelled Stuffy.

"Oh, you won't have no trouble figuring out how to use them," rejoined the store-keeper.

"There's printed directions right on the tube!"

With that, Stuffy gave up trying to talk to the veteran hardware salesman as a bad job. Armed with the tubes of Never-Leak he hastened from the store, preceded by the rest of the party.

"Listen, gang," said Stuffy, when they had taken up their wheels ready to resume the journey, "our path's liable to be strewn with anything but roses the remainder of the way in. What do you think of the idea of me riding far enough ahead so if I pick up some tacks I can warn you fellows? It's going to be dark in another hour and then it'll be almost impossible to avoid punctures unless . . .!"

"Yea!"

"Beat it, Stuffy . . . but don't lose us!"

"All right . . . I'll stick in sight all the while . . . but give yourselves plenty of chance to stop if I signal!"

Under this arrangement the pursuit of Reedland was resumed. The state road out of Old Mission was concrete, stretching out ahead like a grayish strip of toothpaste. The strain of pedaling was increased now by the strain of the eyes as all kept a careful lookout for

any likely impediments. And yet, when the sun finally sunk from sight it was a great relief for the day had been of the scorching variety. A slight breeze, springing up, brought new life to the cyclists.

"How about taking time out for a bite to eat?" called Beef.

"Not us!" kidded Pepper. "We're the boobs that *never* eat. Besides, you'd rather go hungry than have Reedland beat us, wouldn't you?"

Beef pedaled awhile, considering.

"Yes, I guess I would!" he finally decided. "I'd sure hate to think of all the work I've done to-day being wasted!"

And so the grind kept on. Some of the fellows, however, reached into knapsacks or spacious pockets, to pull out apples, cookies and sandwiches, munching them as they rode. These were first day rations intended only until the camp site was reached but they were serving now in the emergency.

"How far have we gone?" someone cried out, when it had gotten so dark that bike lamps were turned on.

"As near as I can figure—thirty-three

miles!" answered Brick, after a number had estimated the distance.

"Hurray!" shouted Morris Fitzgerald, shortest legged member of the party. "Only seven more miles! Ought to be there by nine o'clock! I can just about last that long!"

"Don't look like we're going to overtake Reedland, though," said Merle Conway. "They've sure been setting a terrific pace!"

"Yeah, they're probably in Baldwin now!" surmised Beef, gloomily. "Oh, well—getting there first isn't everything—if we can believe that guy who's in charge of Mr. Kirby's estate!"

"Wonder who this bird Kirby is and what he does?" speculated Jim Hemming.

"I could tell you he's rich without doing any wondering!" replied Joe Kline. "Any person that owns the property *he* does . . .!"

"Look at Stuffy, way up ahead!" called Pete Arrick. "Good thing he's got such a strong tail light or we couldn't keep track of him!"

Hardly had Arrick spoken than something happened. That something was translated best in noise.

"BANG! . . . BANG!"

"Stop, guys, STOP!" came a frantic cry from Stuffy.

And the next instant everyone had dismounted, knowing full well what had happened. By the time they had reached Stuffy afoot, their leader had investigated the road ahead with his flashlight.

"A perfect stream of tacks!" he announced, "laid close to the side of the road and only on the right! Darn clever! They waited till after dark to sprinkle 'em so we'd be sure to catch it! Gee! I don't know how many I've plugged with my tires. I swerved out just as soon as they blew. Hope they're not too badly punctured to keep Never-Leak from fixing it!"

Stuffy turned his wheel upside down and, helped by the concentrated gleam of half a dozen flashlights, set to work. He found five tacks in the front tire and three in the back—more than enough to have caused trouble!

"Oh, boy—wouldn't we have been wrecked if we'd all been together!" exclaimed Stuffy. "Leave it to Tim Norton to have picked the longest tacks he could find! These would lay a carpet half an inch thick!"

"Now please don't exaggerate!" cautioned Beef, glad of the chance to rest. "Oh, gosh,

if I only had a drink of *water!*" He looked around, hopefully, in the darkness.

"Maybe it'll rain by morning," encouraged Brick, pointing at gathering clouds.

It required all the contents of one tube of Never-Leak to plug the holes in the two tires. Stuffy pumped the tires up, breathing a sigh of relief only when a test failed to show any bubbles.

"There! That didn't take so long . . . and Tim Norton's simple little scheme to put us out of commission has failed so far. But there's one thing certain, gang . . . we can't take the right side of the road any more! We'll have to chance it and break a traffic regulation by riding on the left. When we're due to pass any cars we'd better pull off the road and dismount!"

Stuffy's advice was taken and what Beef termed "his *last leg* of the journey" was entered upon. The going was much slower, however, because of the manner in which the party was forced to proceed. Passing motorists were also extremely uncivil.

"Get over where you belong!" raved one of them, as he passed. "What's the matter with you?"

"There's nothing the matter with us!" retorted Merle Conway. "There's something the matter with where we belong!" But his words were lost in the roar of the motor.

At last the glimmering lights of Baldwin began to appear ahead and, with the reaching of the town limits, Stuffy decided that it was safe to resume the right side of the street. At sight of the first traffic policeman, the party stopped.

"We're looking for a man by the name of Mr. Edwin Kirby," said Stuffy. "Could you tell us where he lives?"

"Edwin Kirby!" repeated the cop. "I sure can! Three blocks down, two to the right and it's the house behind the hedge. Can't miss it. There's nothing like it in town!"

"Gee!" said Beef, in an undertone. "This Kirby must be some ham and eggs all right! Let's find out what we can about him!" Turning to the policeman, Beef inquired politely: "Would you mind telling us a little bit about this Mr. Kirby, sir? You see, we don't know him so very well but we were told to get in touch with him . . . and, naturally, we'd like to know who we're getting in touch *with!*"

The policeman grinned. He had been studying the party under the arc light.

"You boys had better hit it for the 'Y' and get under the showers," he advised. "Look like you'd been on the road for a week without taking a bath!"

"Feels like it, too!" agreed Beef. "But that's not answering my question!"

The policeman changed the "stop and go" sign.

"Get your wheels over there to the curb!" he ordered. "You're obstructing traffic!"

Milford complied, then came back and gathered round, expectantly.

"Well, what do you want to know about Ed Kirby?" asked the copper, enjoying his rôle as informant.

"Everything that's worth knowing!" hinted Stuffy.

The officer chuckled.

"That'ud take too long," he answered. "Mr. Kirby's our most distinguished citizen! Some call him a sportsman . . . others call him a philanthropist . . . still others regard him as a chicken fancier . . . as for myself, I think he's the whitest man that ever put his feet in shoe leather!"

"That's a pretty fair report," admitted Stuffy, trying not to appear overly impressed.

"Always helping somebody!" continued the policeman. "He's strict, though! Don't believe in helping nobody that doesn't help themselves! You should see what he done for my kid! Tom had infantile paralysis when he was two years old and come out of it with a bum leg. Mr. Kirby pays to bring a big surgeon here that fixes Tom up. But there's some extra treatments after the operation that he figures *I* can stand, so he lets *me* pay *that*. See how he works? He figures everybody should earn what they get!"

Stuffy nodded.

"That's great! I hope we can make him think we've earned what we want to get!"

"What's that?" asked the copper, bluntly.

"Why . . . er . . . a . . . permission to camp on his property out near Cedar Lake," answered Stuffy.

The policeman whistled.

"Now there's where you're in trouble!" he informed. "Mr. Kirby had a terrible time last summer. He was telling me how a lot of folks took advantage . . .!"

"We've heard all about that, too," interrupted Beef, anxious to be off now that some line had been obtained on the gentleman in

question, "Mr. Kirby's ground keeper gave us the dope! Much obliged for the 'info.' See you again! Bye, bye!"

The speed with which the Milford crowd disappeared surprised even the veteran traffic cop. At any other time, perhaps, they might have welcomed a long discourse on Edwin Kirby but, beyond learning who and what he was, the main thing was in reaching him as soon as possible.

"Gee, I started something when I asked that bird to spill everything worth knowing about Mr. Kirby, didn't I?" laughed Stuffy. "But how could I tell he was a talking encyclopedia?"

"He'd talk the 'Stop and Look' off a traffic sign as long as there was any 'Listen' left!" punned Beef. "Which way'd he say now—to the right?"

The boys experienced no difficulty in riding straight to the house directed. But, as they approached the dwelling surrounded by the hedge, they gave a groan of disappointment. Somehow each had hoped against hope that the Reedland crowd would become sidetracked or fail to locate the Kirby residence immediately. No such luck! There were their wheels, parked by the curb and leaned against trees

between curb and sidewalk. A few of the Reedland gang stood outside the hedge as though awaiting others gone within.

"Think there's any use of our pulling up?" asked Merle Conway.

"Sure there is!" Stuffy called back. "Do you suppose they'd be hanging around if the thing was decided? Besides—look at that house—it's pitch dark! I don't believe Mr. Kirby's home!"

In the next few seconds, Milford was again face to face with Reedland. Two weary rival groups stared at one another in the nightly shadows, pierced only by vague rays from the street light on the corner. And both gangs were glad of the darkness, hiding as it did the tired lines in faces, enabling each to mask their real feelings.

"Well, we beat you, but it didn't do us any good!" greeted Tim Norton, emerging from the Kirby yard.

"So I see!" commented Beef, dryly. "Been here long?"

"Oh, about an hour and a half. Not right here all the time. Around town some! This Mr. Kirby appears to have been gone all summer!"

Some Milfordites turned flashlights on the house and discovered, as Reedland had done, that the windows were boarded over and there was no evidence of living about the place.

"That policeman could have told us a lot more!" remarked Brick, in a low tone.

"He'd have come to this later," rejoined Pepper, guardedly. "We didn't give Mr. Long-Drawn-Out time. What we'd better do is slip back and ask him where his friend Kirby's gone!"

"That's an idea!" whispered Brick. "But first let's see if we can find out how much Reedland knows!"

The crowd of fellows looked like a small mob in front of the hedge, practically blocking the sidewalk and running over into the street. Passers-by glanced at them curiously; a few, across the street, even paused to look on.

"We're liable to get arrested for loitering!" said Morris Fitzgerald, nervously.

"Don't worry!" assured Tim Norton, sportively. "We've called personally on every house in this block asking as to the whereabouts of this guy Kirby . . . so everybody knows our business. We can save you that much trouble anyhow!"

"Thanks!" grinned Stuffy. "But you didn't say what you found out?"

"Ah, that's another story!" Tim replied, evasively. Then, in an attempt to inquire off-handedly, he asked: "Have a nice trip?"

The Milford crowd stiffened. As Beef remarked afterwards, he considered Tim Norton's question as "bordering on the impertinent and certainly *'tackless'!*" But Stuffy, without so much as a blinking of the eyes, met the issue.

"Very fine, thank you!" he answered. "And *you?*"

"Exceedingly pleasant!" returned Tim. "We *did* enjoy being out in the sun! It was so invigorating! Passed one man in a field who'd had a sunstroke, but then, he wasn't in condition! Certainly pays to be in shape. That's us the year around! That's why you guys can't touch us in football!"

"Razzberries!" shouted the Milford crowd, derisively.

"What did we do to you last year?" demanded Beef.

"Just a lucky break!" kidded Tim. "Wait till you see what we do to you *this* year! That's what counts! We're going to start by

trimming you out of your camping place . . . !"

"HA! HA!"

"All right—you're welcome to the first laugh! We'll take the last! Good night, Milford!"

The Reedland bunch took to their bicycles and swung off down the street amid a motley of challenging shouts.

"Quick!" cried Stuffy. "One of us has got to follow that crowd, keep tab on them and report back!"

"That's *me!*" volunteered Pepper, grabbing up his wheel.

"Good! There's a tourist's camp somewhere in Baldwin. I stopped there once with Dad in the car. What do you say we get permission to stay there over night, gang? And Pepper can reach us by phone there if he needs to!"

"Okay!"

"Sounds good!"

"Good-by, fellows!" called Pepper, starting off. "See you later!"

"Certainly hope so!" said Beef. "Watch yourself! Don't let Reedland catch you! No telling what they'd do to a member of the Big Three if they got him alone!"

But Pepper was already out of hearing.

The Milford crowd then turned to Stuffy, quite naturally, for further direction since this other member of the Big Three had practically taken over the leadership.

"What plans you got up your sleeve?" asked Merle Conway.

"Not any for to-night!" replied Stuffy. "It's a sure cinch Mr. Kirby can't be reached right away or Reedland would have done it. Seems to me the thing for us to do is to turn in and get a good night's rest . . . then up early in the morning to make a systematic canvass of the town and learn what we can. Meanwhile Pepper can be depended on to keep Reedland from stealing a march on us!"

"Show us the tourist camp!" commanded Beef. "I'm not so sure about that 'up early in the morning' business. But everything else sounds reasonable!"

"One thing," reminded Brick, as the leg-worn party started off for their place of rest, "it's dead certain that Reedland's just as fagged as we are! They're not going to go far or do much to-night, either!"

Half an hour later, two tents on the site occupied by the Baldwin Tourist Camp con-

tained twelve blissfully unconscious forms. These forms, before losing consciousness, had partaken of such eatables as the camp afforded, first, however—washing off most of the day's grime and gaining a good measure of refreshment thereby.

But, for the volunteer member of the Milford gang there was to be none of this. If he slept at all, he must sleep in snatches. He would have little opportunity to relax the vigil he had set for himself. Reedland must be watched!

CHAPTER III

A CLUE!

THE night man in charge of the tourist camp stuck his head inside a tent flap at five the next morning and, in a loud voice, awakened every occupant by the query: "Who's Stuffy Owen?"

When those in the tent had gained their senses sufficiently to answer, the more corpulent among them—Beef Mellon by name—vouchsafed the rather indignant information that the individual sought was beneath the next stretch of canvas.

"Lot of nerve to wake *us* up!" snorted Beef, promptly rolling over and preparing for sleep again.

But there was to be little rest for the lazy. Those in the tent were not beyond hearing what was said without.

"Stuffy Owen!" boomed the voice, "you're wanted on the telephone! Very important!"

No further words were necessary to arouse

the entire Milford party to action. Every member was struggling into his clothes by the time Stuffy went streaking down the grassy lane toward the Baldwin Tourist Camp Rest Room and Filling Station.

"Gosh, my legs are still stiff!" grunted Beef. "I can hardly get 'em inside my knickers!"

"You probably kicked the covers off last night," suggested Merle, "and they got exposed! They'll be all right when you've been on the road a couple of hours!"

"Listen, brother!" objected Beef, painfully, "I wouldn't duplicate what we did yesterday for five touchdowns against Reedland!"

"Hear the boy rave!" kidded Joe Kline. "But he doesn't mean a word of it. If it came right down to it he knows darn well he'd do it all over again if Milford only gained a foot!"

"Milford's already lost two feet," bemoaned Beef, "Mine'll never be the same again!"

Stuffy came hurrying back, looking in on the fellows.

"News from Pepper," he announced. "Reedland camped last night one mile out on the state road. He says Reedland's up and moving. As near as he can make out, they're headed

back toward where we came from. That means one of two things—either they've given up and are hitting it for home . . . or they've got some sort of tip and are returning to Mr. Kirby's property!"

Milfordites in Stuffy's own tent emerged to listen to proceedings.

"We won't know for a couple of hours what Reedland's up to," continued Stuffy. "Because the road to their home town doesn't cross the state highway till fifteen miles below Baldwin I've told Pepper to stick to 'em, though, and as soon as he knows definitely where they're going, to stop at a farm house and call us back. Meanwhile we'll be doing some investigating here and leave someone at this tourist camp to pick up Pepper's phone."

Under Stuffy's direction the party of twelve was split up in twos, the fellows spreading out over town on a reconnoitering mission to pick up as much information from as many different sources as possible on one Edwin Kirby.

"Morris Fitzgerald's the boy to stick here at the camp and get Pepper's call," declared Beef. "That's his penalty for falling asleep when we left him to guard our bikes. Besides, if he falls to sleep on this assignment, that

hard-faced bird in the office will sure bring him to; he's got a voice like the cross between a train announcer and a radio loud speaker!"

It was agreed that everyone was to reassemble at the tourist camp at eight o'clock. Brick regretted it had slipped his mind last evening to have seen the communicative traffic policeman again. The copper had appeared to know so much about Mr. Kirby but he would be off duty now and undoubtedly in bed and asleep.

"Might look him up anyhow," joshed Pete Arrick. "Being asleep shouldn't interfere with *his* talking!"

Stuffy paired off with Brick, the other member of the Big Three. With Fitzgerald left behind, as the pairings worked out, Beef Mellon turned up—odd man.

"Suits me!" he proclaimed, cheerfully. "I do my stuff better alone anyway! All I ask is for something hard because I intend to take it easy!"

"All right," laughed Stuffy. "It'll be *your* job to find Mr. Kirby's barber and to cross-examine him!"

"What do you want me to find out?" asked Beef, faking ignorance. "Whether Mr. Kirby has dandruff?"

"Go swallow a bottle of hair tonic!" Stuffy retorted, and Beef forthwith pedaled off, looking for barber poles.

Four pairs of fellows were sent in search of different people who, through their connection with community life, should know considerable about so prominent a man as Edwin Kirby was supposed to be. Finally Brick and Stuffy were the only ones left. Morris Fitzgerald had taken his position in the lounging room of the Tourist Station with an ear for each ringing of the phone though he wasn't ordinarily expecting a call for some time yet.

"Well?" asked Brick, as the last of the Milfordites disappeared down the street, "what did you save for us to investigate?"

"The newspaper office!" answered Stuffy. "I've a strong hunch we'll dig up some real dope there. Newspapers usually know lots more about people than they print! If we could just locate Mr. Kirby, providing he was too far away to reach personally, we might wire him for permission to camp on his property . . . get his consent by return wire and take this wire out to show the man in charge! You remember the custodian said

Mr. Kirby's permission had to be written!"

"That's right!" recalled Brick. "Evidently he's been stung before by people who claimed they had Mr. Kirby's consent when they didn't! Can you imagine Reedland pulling out like they have? What do you suppose they really *know?*"

"Not a darn thing!" exploded Stuffy. "I just think they're putting up a grand bluff! . . . Hello—who was that?"

Stuffy wheeled suddenly, pointing to a figure which evidently had been standing behind a tree. The figure was now in full flight. It stopped at the corner, reached down and jerked a bicycle up which had been concealed in some deep grass.

"Reedland!" cried Brick, excitedly. "Good night! We're being spied on, too!"

Stuffy stared after the racing figure, open-mouthed.

"Gee, I wonder how much we said? That guy must have been planted behind this tree ever since we started out . . . or else he was up the tree!"

The two members of the Big Three, Milford's widely heralded football triumvirate,

made famous through their winning of last season's game against Reedland, reflected on how easily they had been outwitted.

"Pretty dumb, weren't we?" smiled Stuffy, ruefully. "We figured we were the only ones slick enough to think of sending out a spy. See the bark scraped off on this side? That fellow's been up this tree since early morning at least! What he's heard and seen has been plenty!"

"Of course, all he knows is of our movements," soothed Brick.

"And our intentions!" added Stuffy. "But we know something, too! We know that Reedland's not quitting . . . that Reedland has a darn good reason for leaving Baldwin!"

At the barber shop, Beef was received with all the acclaim of the first morning customer. He was cordially seized and all but pushed toward the chair.

"No haircut, thanks!" he said, holding back. "Just information!"

"Cost you double for that!" warned the barber.

"Willing to pay!" promised Beef. "Providing you cut it short. There was a guy last

night . . . well, never mind—we won't go into him. Anyhow, what I want to know is—where is your fellow townsman, Edwin Kirby?"

The barber stared.

"Kirby!" he repeated, recollecting, "ain't seen him in two months!"

"Then you're his barber!" pronounced Beef, joyfully.

"No, sir, I ain't. The man to the next chair is. He won't be in till this afternoon."

Beef registered mild disappointment.

"Oh, is that so? . . . Well, maybe you'll do. You say you haven't seen Mr. Kirby for two months. Did you hear him say, by any chance, where he was going?"

The barber looked off into space.

"N-no, I didn't," he replied, slowly. "You can't ever tell where that fellow's apt to go. He's away from home as much as he's here. Would be just like him to be in Europe . . . or out west . . . or touring the world. Nothing to hold him down!"

"He—he's married, isn't he?" ventured Beef.

The barber laughed.

"I should say not! Old Kirby's a confirmed bach!"

"Well, what's he do for a living?"

"He's already *did!* Made his money in lumber and copper. Now spends his time trying to spend it!"

Beef looked askance. The barber's eyes twinkled.

"Oh, Mr. Kirby doesn't throw his jack away," he hastened to assure. "I heard him say once that travel was his only luxury. He spends lots more on others than he does on himself!"

Beef fidgeted, anxious to be off. This was all very interesting but it wasn't finding Mr. Kirby.

"And you don't know anybody who might know where Mr. Kirby is?" Beef demanded.

The barber shook his head.

"Mr. Kirby's a close-mouthed man. His business is nobody else's business. Might try the postoffice, though. They might be able to give you his forwarding address!"

Beef started, then grinned sheepishly.

"Never thought of that," he confessed. "I guess my brain cells are sort of dusty. Ever so much obliged!"

"Keep the change!" rejoined the barber, generously.

And Beef, heaviest member of Milford's

football squad, was on his way to the postmaster!

At the office of the *Baldwin Record-Herald,* Stuffy and Brick made their wants known. They were referred to the managing editor who in turn referred them to the reporters who in turn referred them to the newspaper files.

"We don't know where Mr. Kirby is but if you want to find out all about him, look through the June issues of last year," they advised.

This Stuffy and Brick did, getting exceedingly dusty and besmudged in the process. The bound volumes of papers, stored in a dingy, high-ceilinged room, were simply coated with a powdery layer of dirt. It took half an hour, because of the unclassified arrangement, to locate the volume desired.

"Whew!" choked Stuffy, as he spanked the dust from the book, "I know why they sent us in here! They wanted us to clean the place out for them!"

"Or maybe they've been looking for this book on June themselves and haven't been able to find it," surmised Brick. "You never can tell!"

But, in the June 11th issue, the boys were

rewarded by a full-page write-up on Edwin Kirby with a two-column cut of his likeness.

"Fine looking guy!" exclaimed Stuffy, admiringly. "Smooth-faced . . . see that chin! Denotes force of character!"

"What do you know about chins?" kidded Brick. "See those eyes—they denote kindness . . . and that nose—well, a bird with a nose like that just couldn't refuse us permission to camp on his property!"

For answer, Stuffy blew the dust from a page, Brick dodging to keep the cloud from settling on him.

"Say, we ought to have a copy of this issue. Let's see if we can find an extra one in these bins below . . . Now that we know the date!"

The two chums began rummaging about.

"Wouldn't you think they could afford more than this dinky little electric light in here?" complained Stuffy. "We'll have to take these papers to the door to read the date lines!"

"If some real light was ever shed on this place," said Brick, "they couldn't ever get anyone to go in it! . . . Yea! Here's what we're looking for!"

Sure enough—an unbound copy of last year's

June 11th paper! Eagerly, without the confines of the files, Stuffy and Brick devoured the details concerning the character they were seeking. The lead for this story had to do with Mr. Kirby's interest in poultry as a diversion. The page had been prepared in connection with a poultry show then held in Baldwin and the story went on to say that Mr. Kirby was recognized as an international authority on fowls. Apparently Mr. Kirby was a man of many-sided interests. "A man," one paragraph emphasized, "who, with comparatively little effort, has made small fortunes off his hobbies!" It was then pointed out that Mr. Kirby had come into possession of valued timber lands through his exploring nature, had later discovered copper mines in this same country, had taken to sports and had owned prize-winning horses, had become a chicken fancier and had won prizes the world over on exhibits and, between times, had busied himself with various unique charitable enterprises.

"All of which tells us much but doesn't help us a darn bit!" lamented Brick.

"I don't know about that!" cried Stuffy, suddenly. "Let me look at Mr. Kirby's face again! Hmmm! . . . Got a nickel? Go

pay for this paper . . . tell the editor a million thanks . . . and come on! We've got to be beating it!"

Brick, giving Stuffy a questioning glance, followed out instructions and rejoined his chum.

"Well, what's struck you?" he demanded.

"A clue!" replied Stuffy, excitedly. "Don't make me explain now! It's time we were meeting the gang!"

Slipping the paper inside his jacket, Stuffy leaped on his wheel and was off. Brick, protesting in vain, could only trail behind, wonderingly.

CHAPTER IV

FROM AMBUSH

The gang, regathered at the Tourists' Camp, had a great smattering of news to tell. Most of it, however, had no bearing on the case in point. Stuffy purposely refrained from divulging any information he had gained until the reports of the others were in. Of all these, Beef came the closest to unearthing something of value.

"Postmaster Driscoll told me," recited Beef, "that when Mr. Kirby went away he left word to have his mail held. Mr. Kirby said that the people he wanted to get in touch with him would know where to reach him and that everyone else wouldn't matter!"

"Good work, Beef!" complimented Stuffy.

"Humph!" sniffed Beef, "if you can make anything out of that, you're welcome! To me it's like a dog chasing his own tail. I'm right back where I started from!"

At this moment, Morris Fitzgerald came rushing up.

"A call from Pepper!" he informed. "Reedland's struck camp twenty miles out. They're on their way back to Kirby's property all right. Did some telephoning on their own hook at the same house Pepper just called from. Now they're either waiting for those of their gang who're still in town to get out to them . . . or else they're lying around for more information to come through. Pepper's holding the wire and wants to know what to do next?"

The Milfordites looked at one another and then all eyes instinctively turned to Stuffy.

"Tell Pepper to pick us up on the road this afternoon. No use of his following Reedland any longer. We'll be through about three o'clock!"

Fitzgerald turned on his heel and was gone.

"Listen, gang!" cried Stuffy, pulling out the paper and holding it up so that all could see the cut of Mr. Kirby. "Here's the man we're looking for. Any one of you ever seen him before?"

The Milfordites moved up close, scrutinizing the picture carefully.

"Not me!" said Merle Conway.

"Nor me!" from Pete Arrick.

"What good would it do us if we *had* seen him?" asked Joe Kline. "Seeing him once isn't seeing him now . . . and it's now that counts!"

Stuffy smiled.

"How about you, Brick? You're pretty good at remembering faces!"

Brick looked long and hard, finally giving up. There was nothing in Mr. Kirby's features which suggested any person he had ever seen.

"Well, maybe *I'm* dumb then," said Stuffy, at length, after causing every fellow to search his memory, "but try to imagine how Mr. Kirby would look with a beard!"

Immediately there was a quickening of interest. Eyes sought out the picture, squinted at it half-closed; brows lowered thoughtfully.

"SAY!" cried three Milfordites at once, as though making a discovery.

"Say *what?*" grinned Stuffy, nodding his head knowingly.

"THE CUSTODIAN!" cried Beef, bound to get his "say" in first. "Oh, wait till I see that Mr. Kirby! Making us go to all this work to find him when he was there all the time!"

"If it really is he!" said Stuffy, "I think he's done what he did to try out our sportsmanship and our wits!"

"Not to mention our *endurance!*" moaned Beef. "And today's another scorcher!"

"Just the same," insisted Stuffy, "if you fellows feel as I do, that Mr. Kirby, bearded, might look like the man who says he's taking care of the estate . . . I think it's worth the trip back to confront him with this picture and challenge his identity!"

"So do I!" agreed Brick, "although I confess I wouldn't have seen a possible likeness unless my attention had been called to it. Still, the more you look at that face and the more you think of that custodian . . .!"

"And the more you think of Mr. Kirby's having his mail held," emphasized Stuffy, "which would seem to indicate that he wasn't going far even though he hasn't been seen here for two months. He'd evidently figured on being close enough so he could get his mail at short notice if he should have wanted it!"

"Boy, you're a regular Sherlock!" exclaimed Beef, admiringly. "Hang on to that paper, for Pete's sake! It may be our ticket of admittance to the camping ground!"

Within fifteen minutes the Milfordites were again on the road, pedaling more leisurely this time for there was no longer the seeming necessity of beating anyone to a certain point. Stuffy felt fairly confident that the Reedland crowd were not in possession of exact knowledge as to Mr. Kirby's whereabouts. It was his thought that Tim Norton had caused his cohorts to return with the speculation that Mr. Kirby might be found somewhere on the premises. In going over the information that the custodian had given out, it was recalled that no denial had been made of Mr. Kirby's being in the vicinity. The custodian had merely said, when questioned, that Mr. Kirby lived in Baldwin. He had not said that Mr. Kirby was in Baldwin at the present time. Thus, in failing to pin the custodian down more definitely, both sides had blundered.

"Reedland surely isn't going to get the hunch that the custodian might be Mr. Kirby!" reasoned Stuffy, "without seeing a picture of Mr. Kirby first! And, if the custodian is Mr. Kirby you can bet he's not going to admit it unless he's forced to . . . or he'd have done it voluntarily yesterday! No, sir! There's something behind all this if our figur-

ing is anywhere near right . . . and I'm darned interested in getting to the bottom of it!"

"So am I," admitted Beef. "But never again at the rate of forty miles a day on a bicycle!"

Shortly after three, as Stuffy had estimated, the party encountered Pepper, lone adventurer, who had been sleeping in a secluded nook just off the road to make up for his night of forced wakefulness. Milford was now at the halfway mark and paused for a well-earned rest. Pepper was enthusiastically greeted.

"Know any more?" asked Stuffy.

"Nothing, except that Reedland's on the move again," said Pepper. "Left about an hour ago after hanging around most of the morning. I wasn't watching all the time."

"Probably waited for the man they left in Baldwin to reach them," deduced Stuffy. "Gee, there's where we slipped up! If I'd only thought I'd had you waylay that bird . . .!"

Pepper grinned broadly.

"Would you? . . . Come over here into this thicket!"

Stuffy followed, wonderingly. The rest of the party, laying down their wheels, tagged along.

"Fitzgerald!" bellowed Beef. "Get back there and watch those bicycles! How dare you come with us?"

"Here you are, Captain!" announced Pepper, with a mocking bow, as he held aside some bushes.

There, stretched out on the ground, tied hand and foot, was the figure of a Reedland man!

"You fellows remember Bennett, don't you?" introduced Pepper. "The right end who caused us so much trouble last year? . . . Mr. Bennett, this is Milford!"

The figure only glared.

"Pepper, you're a double-dyed wonder!" exclaimed Stuffy. "When'd you make this catch?"

"Oh, he came through around ten o'clock. We just happened to meet and, after some little discussion, I persuaded Mr. Bennett to stay with me rather than to join Reedland just around the bend!"

The Milford crowd roared.

"But seeing that Mr. Bennett didn't care to talk," continued Pepper, "and being rather tired myself, I thought we might as well lie down and take a nap. I slept till a little after

two but Mr. Bennett decided that he wouldn't get up for a while yet. And when I went up to the bend to call upon his friends, I found them just starting on their way. Got tired waiting for him, I guess. Can't blame them, though. Rather inconsiderate of Mr. Bennett to be so late. I understand he had some information Reedland would have liked. . . ."

The figure on the ground writhed and attempted to raise up but was too securely bound.

"Where'd you get the rope to tie him with?" asked Beef.

"Most obliging cuss you ever saw," explained Pepper. "He carried it with him!"

"The same fellow who was spying on us this morning!" identified Brick.

"Ow!" yelled the captive, squirming violently. "Let me up! These ants are eating me alive!"

"Promise to be a good boy?" teased Pepper.

"I'll be anything!" moaned the prisoner, "Only let me up!"

Pepper stood the much aggrieved Mr. Bennett on his feet.

"You've got no kick coming!" he reprimanded. "Who declared war anyhow? Reed-

land? Who scattered tacks on the road? Reedland! Who's been our worst enemy for years? Reedland! And here you're hollering because a couple of ants are chasing up and down your spine! Why, say—you ought to be tickled stiff that you can *feel* the ants!"

Pepper had to turn his head away to keep the Reedland spy from seeing the gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"What'll we do with this guy, Cap?"

"Tie him to a tree and leave him here!" ordered Stuffy. "He *likes* trees!"

"Good idea!" seconded Beef. "And tie a sandwich to a string and dangle it from a bough overhead so he can bite at it and starve to death slowly!"

"Yea!" shouted Milford, enjoying Bennett's expression of acute discomfiture.

"See here, you fellows!" said Bennett, hoarsely, "you'd better be careful what you do to me! If I'd die here of exposure you'd be in an awful fix!"

Milford laughed uproariously.

"Seems to me you'd be in the worst fix!" taunted Merle Conway.

"How can a fellow die of exposure in the summer time?" Beef wanted to know.

"Oh, he might get caught in the rain without his rubbers on," advised Brick, dryly.

"Or he might lose his voice and not be able to call for help," added Pepper.

"Or the fright might finish him," suggested Jim Hemming.

"I can't understand it," guyed Stuffy. "Such a brave man on the football field, too!"

"Aw, cut it! Cut it!" begged the prisoner.

Stuffy eyed Bennett, coldly.

"All right! Come clean, then! How much does your bunch know about Edwin Kirby?"

The captive stared, hesitantly.

"Why, I . . . why, I . . . !"

"Do they know where Mr. Kirby is at the present time?"

"Why, I . . . why, I . . .!"

"Tie him to a tree!" commanded Stuffy, "He stutters too much! Besides, we've got to be moving on!"

"NO! NO!" shouted Bennett, "I'll tell! I'll tell!"

Stuffy raised a restraining arm as Pepper and Brick dragged the Reedland spy toward a sturdy oak.

"Your last chance!" he warned.

The prisoner gulped.

"We—we don't know a thing! That is . . . about where Mr. Kirby is, I mean!"

"Then why are you on the way back? You wouldn't make this long trip again for nothing, would you?"

Here was a question that Bennett evidently didn't relish answering. He looked about as though searching for a plausible excuse and, finding none, was finally forced to blurt out: "Because we knew *you* were going back . . . and we figured *you* had a darn good reason!"

"Go on!" invited Stuffy.

"That's all!" snapped Bennett.

"And, if we've got the *reason,*" proposed Stuffy, "how was it you planned to come out ahead?"

The Reedland spy took on a measure of defiance.

"By always being first on the ground!" he shot back. "As long as we're in front we're not worrying about how much you know or what you can do!"

"That's all!" concluded Stuffy, satisfied. "Untie the prisoner and load him down with our supplies. He's going to make the trip with us as a human pack horse!"

The Milford army took to the highway

again shortly after five when the most torrid heat of the day was on the wane. Stuffy saw no sense in rushing. He had no idea of leading Milford into a trap set by Reedland. Chances were, the enemy was plotting some sort of resistance in the vicinity of the Kirby property. Perhaps they would endeavor to keep Milford from getting through and thus establishing any rightful claim Milford might have to the extension of a camping privilege. At any rate, inasmuch as there remained only several more hours of daylight, it would not be wise to venture any nearer than within striking distance of the Kirby estate that evening. To-morrow a careful approach could be made with little comparative danger. But Milford must ever be on the alert. This Reedland foe was crafty, of the never-give-up kind!

As dusk was settling over the country, Milford passed the government air port. A plane was just landing from the west in the face of a flood of light which illuminated the field with the brightness of midday.

"Some class to that!" commented Beef. "That's the way I'm going to travel next time. No danger of picking up tacks or running off the road or getting in anybody's way!"

"Of course you'd have to find fault with whatever you're doing," kidded Joe Kline. "But I claim we've flown right along as it is!"

"Yeah!" complained Beef. "And that's just the trouble! My feet have been going around this sprocket like a propeller for hours! I tell you, man wasn't never supposed to fly with his legs!"

"Cheer up, Beef!" laughed Stuffy. "Three miles ahead is a good place to camp for the night. Remember where the state road runs through that deep ravine? Well, just on the other side of that. There's drinking water in the woods near by and it's far enough away from where anybody lives so we won't be bothered!"

"Unless someone takes us for a band of gypsies!" ruminated Pepper.

A cyclone is said to strike with great suddenness and to create devastation in a twinkling. Certainly that which struck Milford could not have descended more without warning or have rendered those in its path more helpless! And, strangely enough, it was while passing through this ravine—with their haven of rest in sight—that disaster befell the Mil-

fordites! So unexpectedly did a black wall rise up and smite them down that they had little chance to struggle against it! Bicycles were either knocked or torn from under them; they were rolled and pitched in the ditch beside the road; packs, possessions and clothing became detached and lost in the violent upheaval of the moment . . . all was confusion with each individual fiercely besieged!

As nearly as the members of the Milford gang could describe their feelings afterward, they had quite abruptly been confronted with black forms which seemed to rise from beside the road. The next instant a something descended over their heads and they felt their arms securely lashed to their sides. At about the same time there was the giddy sense of their wheels sliding from under them, then the crash to the roadbed, a rolling into the ditch or a dragging through underbrush . . . and finally their being deposited, some distance apart, in a hollow removed from the highway!

CHAPTER V

MILFORD'S ONLY HOPE

"ANYBODY hurt?" called Stuffy, when the bewildering tempest was over.

The darkness prevented any check-up of the possible damage done. And, beyond that, the boys—bound as they were—found it difficult to move.

"I—I'm all right!" gasped Beef. "Got several choice bruises, I guess . . . but they don't count!"

"My face is scratched some," admitted Brick.

"Boy, what a header I took off that bike!" muttered Pepper. "I seem to be all here, though!"

"Better call the roll!" suggested Merle Conway. "Somebody may have been knocked cuckoo!"

Stuffy immediately ordered everyone to speak up and relief was expressed when all hands were accounted for. But such a variety

of groans and grunts as were given in answer!

"What—what hit us?" asked Morris Fitzgerald, dazedly. He had been the last to make his whereabouts known, lying as he had been thrown—face downward. His arms were pinioned in such a way that he could not turn over without considerable discomfort and yet the sand in his mouth and nose was almost as distasteful. "Whew! This is awful!"

"Anybody see that guy, Bennett?" inquired Pepper. "He was just ahead of me when things happened!"

"Bennett!" cried Stuffy, sharply.

No answer.

"He's gone! That explains it beyond a doubt . . . REEDLAND!"

"Well, aren't WE in a pretty *mess?*" moaned Beef. "We're right where we had Bennett a little while ago, only WORSE!"

"Yeah," replied Pepper, ruefully, "I'll bet he's giving us the grand laugh now!"

"MY PAPER!" exclaimed Stuffy. "THEY'VE GOT IT!"

"Sure they've got it," derided Brick. "What do you suppose they jumped us for—just for exercise? Leave it to them to get anything

they wanted! I'll bet they've skinned us right down to the bone!"

There was a momentary silence as each Milfordite considered his plight. The voices had sounded weird, speaking up from different spots in the darkness. As nearly as could be judged, the entire party had been dragged over a ridge of earth flanking the sides of the road and had been left prostrate behind this ridge as though entrenched. This placed them beyond the sight of passing motorists and reduced the chance of their outcries bringing aid. There was no occasion anyway for travelers to tarry on this barren stretch and autoists would likely go through at such speed that calls for help would go unheard or ignored.

"I suppose it's mostly my fault," assumed Stuffy, regretfully. "I never expected Reedland to pull anything so far out. They sure put one over on us this time! Have to give 'em credit! Neatest job I ever saw done! Didn't see much of it at that! No noise . . . no waste motion . . . all system! Not a chance to fight back . . . no one miscued . . . every fellow lassoed his man . . . searched and tied his victim . . . and beat

it—all perfectly timed! If we'd pulled the same stunt we'd have patted each other's backs! As it is we can't even use our hands to rub our noses and just now my nose is itching like sixty!"

"This ain't no time to philosophize!" reprimanded Beef. "I don't want to lie here all night! . . . Tell us how we're going to get loose! I've got enough rope wound around me to hang mother's washings twice!"

But Stuffy was unable to render much assistance on that point. His best advice was, "Every fellow for himself" since all seemed to be bound differently, though none the less securely. Stuffy did try, however, to talk as if he regarded the whole affair lightly. This helped to keep the spirits up.

"Remember, gang!" laughed Stuffy, "it's not what happens to you that counts. It's how you *take* it!"

"I wish you'd quit saying things like that when we're in trouble," objected Merle Conway, tugging frantically at his bonds. "They sound beautiful when everything's going along all right, but . . .!"

Silence again ensued . . . a sort of de-

jected silence. Each Milfordite had now had ample time to test his bindings and none could report any immediate likelihood of getting free. Meanwhile Reedland would be jubilantly on the way toward the Kirby estate and—*victory!*

"Oh, well!" said Pepper, finally, in an attempt at consolation. "maybe Reedland won't see any similarity in that picture of Mr. Kirby to the custodian. *We* didn't until Stuffy. . .!"

"Don't you worry!" broke in Stuffy, emphatically, "That Tim Norton's no dub! He can put two and two together as quickly as anyone! We're sunk unless we can get out of here and beat them to the grounds!"

"No chance now!" decided Beef.

"I've got an idea," answered Stuffy. "But it's not worth a nickel unless one of us gets loose!"

"Anyhow," reasoned Brick, "Reedland won't have a chance of seeing the custodian until some time in the morning because his cabin is too far from the road for them to arouse him and they wouldn't dare do that if they could! Gee, I'd give anything if we could get ahead of them yet!"

But, despite two hours of straining and twist-

ing and rolling and grunting, every member of the Milford crowd was finally forced to relax from sheer exhaustion.

"It's no use!" pronounced Stuffy. "If we could see what we're trying to do I think some of us could get away. As it is we'll just have to take our medicine the best we can. I suggest we each roll into as comfortable a position as possible and try to get some sleep. Then, when daybreak comes, the chances are we can help each other out!"

"Gosh, if you only knew how thirsty I am!" moaned Beef. "Oh, for a nice, cool drink of wet WATER!"

"Shut up!" cried other fellow sufferers, involuntarily.

The night passed slowly, seeming almost endless in extent. Happily, it was clear and the temperature pleasing. Only one thing, aside from their naturally cramped and awkward positions, added to their discomfort. Mosquitoes! How they sung, circling about over their helpless prey and settling on unprotected faces! A quick movement often prevented bites but many welts developed before morning, despite agonized squirmings.

"Oh, wait till we catch Reedland!" vowed each Milfordite in turn.

"And if we don't catch 'em now . . . oh, wait till we get 'em in football!" threatened Beef. "They say a mosquito only bites once and then goes off and dies. If that's so, I'll bet I've killed a hundred myself!"

The sun arose upon a sorry looking bunch of would-be campers. Were they not so stiff and sore the sight of them all lying about in the most ludicrous positions imaginable would have occasioned peals of laughter. As it was they only exchanged painful glances of sympathy.

"Brick," called Stuffy, "I feel as though I've at last loosened this rope some. I believe, if you could roll over here and get your teeth into this knot behind my back, that you might help me finish the job!"

"I'll try!" Brick volunteered, being the closest to his chum. "Ouch! It hurts to move! . . . Ow! . . . Say, supposing you roll half way?"

Stuffy complied; others, who could, watching the experiment with interest. Then commenced a period of chewing and spitting on Brick's part.

"What's the matter?" kidded Stuffy. "Doesn't that rope taste good? Never mind, Brick, old boy . . . if you get me free you've chewed yourself into the hero of the hour!"

"Oh, for a drink of water!" sighed Beef.

Brick glared.

"How do you suppose *I'd* like one?" he retorted.

"Isn't there any juice in that rope?" asked Beef, quite mercilessly.

Brick resumed his task, gripping a strand of rope in the knot and pulling desperately, sometimes shaking his head from side to side in an effort to shake the knot loose. Failing in this he attempted to chew the strand through . . . and finally did . . . but the knot still proved unyielding. By this time Brick complained of a lame neck and took ten good minutes of rest.

"There comes an automobile!" said Joe Kline. "Can't we all try hollering again and see if we can attract attention?"

"We can *try* anything," answered Pepper. "All right—let's go!"

"YOO HOO! HELP! HELP! HELP!"

The sound of the motor increased, reached

its maximum loudness and gradually died out down the road as many such sounds had died out before.

"Might as well save our breaths," deduced Pepper, as some Milfordites looked their disappointment. "Brick's our big hope! Come on, Brick! Use those teeth! Keep after it!"

The "chewing" member of the Big Three could not resist a grin as he set his teeth once more in the knot which held Stuffy captive. He had been exhorted to do his utmost when on baseball diamond or football field but to have the fellows suddenly start rooting for him in this situation . . .! Well, it was almost funny!

Beef, sensing Buck's thoughts, called out, "Atta stuff, Brick! Bite 'em! Bite 'em! Bite 'em!"

"How about the good old Milford locomotive?" suggested Merle Conway. "Choo, choo, choo, choo! Choo, choo, choo, choo! . . ."

But, from the wry face that Brick made it was decided that this was slightly overdoing the matter.

At length Brick, red of face, dropped back and called breathlessly to Stuffy, "All right—see what you can do to get free now!"

Stuffy moved his arms, tugging and pulling.

Of a sudden it was seen that the rope was slipping . . . was loosening! A cry of joy went up. A moment later Stuffy had raised to a sitting position, unwinding the rope from his body and rubbing his arms gingerly to bring back circulation.

"I'll tell the wide world this sure feels good!" he announced.

"Never mind about telling anybody! Get to work on us!" raved Beef.

"Brick deserves to get loose next," said Stuffy, feeling through his pockets. "Golly! Reedland certainly cleaned us! Didn't even leave a knife!"

In another minute Brick was released from his rope shackles and he, with Stuffy, turned to others. As each new man was liberated he joined in the work of liberation and soon the thirteen were untied. It was some little time, however, before any of them felt freed of stiff joints and lame muscles.

"I doubt," said Stuffy, "if Reedland realized how well they wrought their work. I think their only intention was to detain us perhaps an hour or so. Now it remains for us to discover what they did to our wheels and supplies!"

A brief investigation disclosed the bicycles, piled in a heap behind some bushes. They were undamaged but had been rendered quite useless for riding by the simple expedient of letting the air out of the tires. And all bicycle pumps had been carefully removed.

"Now what are we to do?" asked Beef, stumped.

"Now," announced Stuffy, "we're going to find out whether that idea I said I had last night is worth the nickel it wasn't while I was tied up!"

"And what's the idea?" persisted Beef, dubiously.

"Beating it back to the air station," said Stuffy, "and seeing that friend of my Dad's . . . and asking him if he won't give me a lift . . .!"

"Yea!"

"Great!"

"If it works!" admitted Stuffy, smiling. "Worth trying, anyhow! Only possible way I know to get ahead of Reedland now! It's just past six and we're fourteen miles from Mr. Kirby's place without any means of getting there. If we did get there we'd have to get by Reedland again and they'd probably already

have been let into the estate if Mr. Kirby's who we think he is and they can prove it!"

"But could an airplane make a landing anywhere near Mr. Kirby's property?" asked Pepper.

"Right *on* it, I'd think!" guessed Stuffy. "Remember that clear, level place up above the lake that we saw from Grand View Hill? Maybe *you* don't . . . but *I* do! Gee, if Major Curran would only do this for us . . .!"

"Cut the IF stuff and get going!" entreated Beef excitedly. "It's three miles back to the aviation field. How long'll it take you to run it?"

"I'll get there as quickly as I can!" promised Stuffy. "I'd like to have Brick run on ahead with me. That means two of you fellows will have to be responsible for our wheels. I'd look around good before leaving here. It's not likely that Reedland's carried all our stuff away with 'em. They've probably hidden it. But if it can't be found the only thing I see for you to do is to follow us to the station, pushing your bikes . . ."

Groans at *this!*

"Or else an autoist might have a pump,"

suggested Stuffy. "Though, I'm sure you could get some air for your tires at the station!"

"Sure ought to—at an *air* station!" punned Joe Kline, receiving only sour glances in exchange for his wit.

Stuffy and Brick, unencumbered with any needless weight, prepared to set off.

"But how are we going to know whether you've been able to get help?" asked Beef.

"If you spot a plane flying over, headed in the right direction, you'll know we've gotten help!" said Stuffy.

"And what are we going to do with your wheels providing we get straightened out again?" queried Beef, grabbing the impatient Stuffy by the arm.

"Leave them at the nearest farm house! Anything else? Everything clear, now?"

"I guess so!" answered Beef, dazedly. "As clear as it'll ever be!"

"All right! Good-by, gang! Don't give up! We're not whipped yet," cried Stuffy, starting off at a dog trot pace, followed by Brick.

CHAPTER VI

THE SHOW-DOWN

Half an hour later, two perspiring youths plunged off the highway and across a field to a row of low white buildings surrounded by a high fence. They rapped unceremoniously on a door marked "Commandant's Office" and, receiving no reply, ran around the small structure to what looked like a greatly over-sized shed from which came the ear-blasting sound of a motor being raced.

At the open door, Stuffy and Brick saw several men within, evidently mechanics, who were testing out the engine in a plane. The mere sight made their blood tingle. They looked at one another exultantly. Planes were probably being tired out every day in actual flight. It would be such a *little* thing to make this short trip IF . . . Ah, IF!

Stuffy, leaving Brick at the door, ventured inside. One of the mechanics, looking up, spied him and indicated surprise. He jabbed his

comrade and pointed, then slipped down off the plane and came over.

"What you doing in here, son?" he demanded, placing his mouth close to Stuffy's ear that he might be heard above the din of the motor.

"I'm looking for Major Curran!" shouted Stuffy.

The mechanic glanced at the youth curiously, then shook his head.

"Major Curran's in Washington this week," he shouted back.

Stuffy's face registered bitter disappointment.

"What you want him for?" demanded the mechanic.

"Wanted to ask if we could be taken on a hurry-up trip!" yelled Stuffy, feeling now as though he were uselessly taxing his voice. He was sure of it when the mechanic laughed.

The other mechanic shut off the motor and the propeller whirred down to a humming stop. But Stuffy's ears still rang from the terrific sound.

"What do you know?" called the first mechanic, "here's a kid who wants to knock the Major down for a ride!"

The second mechanic, wiping grease off his hands, grinned.

"Good thing the Major isn't here!" he rejoined, "or he'd kick the kid out on his ear!"

"Say!" interjected Stuffy, "my Dad and the Major are good friends!"

"So's your Aunt Tillie!" joshed the first mechanic. Then, with a wink at his buddy, "I'll tell you, son . . . Lieutenant Alden's going out for a trial spin in a few minutes. We've just got through warming up his motor. Tackle him when he comes in! He'll give you the air . . . plenty of it!"

Stuffy, his face burning, retreated to the door where Brick was standing, fists clenched.

"They think they're having a good time, don't they?" he raged. "We'll show 'em! Where is this bird Alden? *I'll* tackle him!"

"You mean—*we'll* tackle him!" answered Stuffy. "Never mind those fresh babies. Look —I'll bet that's Lieutenant Alden coming now!"

A smartly dressed officer emerged from a residential looking building, buttoning on a leather coat. As he came toward the hangar he gave a glance at the sky which was clear . . . an almost perfect flying morn-

ing. He smiled. Stuffy and Brick took a liking to him from that moment on.

"Lieutenant Alden?" Stuffy inquired as the aviator passed.

"That's me!" The lieutenant stopped.

"If you please, sir!" broke in Brick, self-consciously, "we need help! We've got to get to a certain place right away! It's very important! Half an hour's delay might be fatal!"

At mention of the word "fatal" the aviator eyed the two youths soberly.

"What's *that?*" he asked, sharply.

"Well . . . er . . . a . . . perhaps not quite 'fatal,'" corrected Brick, nervously, "but . . . er . . . *serious,* anyway!"

"Where is this you want to go?" asked the lieutenant, sharply.

The mechanics came to the door of the hangar and looked out, with grinning expectancy.

"I—I don't suppose you've ever heard of it," supplied Stuffy. "It's over near Cedar Lake . . . only seventeen miles from here . . . Mr. Kirby's place!"

Lieutenant Alden smiled.

"That so?" he inquired, with sudden warmness. "You know Mr. Kirby? I happen to be well acquainted with his place. I crashed there once!"

Stuffy and Brick stiffened hopefully.

"Oh, we . . . we've never met Mr. Kirby personally," Stuffy hastened to advise. "The only time we've seen him is in the newspaper . . . and Reedland's got *that!* You see, Mr. Alden . . . a bunch of us fellows from Milford were told there was a chance of camping on Mr. Kirby's property if we could get his permission . . . so we set out to get it with a bunch of fellows from Reedland bucking us . . . We beat it to Baldwin, Mr. Kirby's home town, and were on our way back with the dope when Reedland jumped us and took it. They also let the wind out of our bike tires . . . and the only chance of our putting it over on them is to get to where Mr. Kirby is before they do!"

"Yes, and what's more!" added Brick, "whether we do or not is absolutely up to you!"

It was here that the mechanics went into paroxysms of laughter. Lieutenant Alden spun around on his heel and addressed them.

"Have the men put that three-seater on the runway!" he ordered. "I'll be taking *my* plane out in half an hour!" Then, turning to two dazedly wondering boys, he said, eyes twinkling, "So it's up to *me,* is it? Well, I've been owing Mr. Kirby a visit all summer. Guess this is as good a time as any to drop down and say 'hello'! You fellows ever been up before?"

Stuffy and Brick shook their heads.

"Come in here and let's see if I can find something for you to wear!"

It seemed like a dream to the two members of Milford's Big Three as the big silver bird, in which they were seated, took the air. But, beyond the elation of actually flying, Stuffy and Brick enjoyed the crestfallen expression on the faces of the two mechanics who saw them off.

"Guess this'll hold those two birds for awhile!" Brick had said, a bit disdainfully.

While the plane was being made ready, the boys had questioned Lieutenant Alden as to his knowledge of Mr. Kirby. They were not helped appreciably in their surmise that the gentleman whom they sought was on the premises.

"He has had a man watching the estate," the lieutenant had informed. "As for myself, I've never seen Mr. Kirby bearded. Nor have I heard of his being at his place except early this summer when he stopped by and asked me to *drop* in on him . . . I'd be inclined to think the man you boys met was the actual custodian. However, I'll be glad to risk the trip on the strength that Mr. Kirby may be there!"

And so, here they were—five hundred . . . a thousand feet in the air . . . looking down . . . down . . . down . . . and following along a white strip that they knew to be the road they had so recently traversed! The briefest of moments and a glimpse of a thin, black line along the road . . . then little white spots along the line—faces upturned! The line had been in motion until the sound of the motor above had caused it to stop jerkily. This fleeting glimpse told Stuffy and Brick that their comrades had either recovered their belongings, including the bicycle pumps . . . or had secured help from some source . . . for Milford was en route by land . . . and air . . . carrying on against Reedland!

A few minutes at the most and Cedar Lake appeared, a glistening mirror in the morning sun. There was Grand View Hill, looking small enough now and anything but insurmountable . . . as it had almost seemed while climbing it. And there, at the end of the road—a little bunch of white dots just outside a fence—upturned faces again . . . *Reedland faces!*

"We're in time!" screamed Stuffy, gleefully. "They haven't gotten to the custodian yet!"

But his voice was lost somewhere between the roar of the motor and the higher altitudes.

Twice the three-seater plane encircled the lake and then, going into a glide it commenced to lose height. Stuffy and Brick had a sudden sense of the ground racing up to meet them. They glanced at each other concernedly. There was the level field Stuffy had seen from the hill top . . . but here, rapidly rising to meet them, was a wall of trees! Both clutched their seats and shut their eyes instinctively, expecting the worst. Nothing happened except a funny gone feeling in the pit of the stomach . . . then a sudden bumpiness which jostled them up and down! They opened their eyes and looked about. Why—they had landed!

Were even then taxiing to a gentle stop!

Lieutenant Alden shut off the motor and leaned back.

"Well, how'd you like it?" he smiled.

"Gee, it hardly seems as though we've been up, it was over so quick!" gasped Stuffy. "We're certainly more than obliged to you!"

"I should say we are!" seconded Brick. "If you knew what rivals Milford and Reedland were, you'd realize how much we appreciate this!"

"I happen to have a small idea," answered the lieutenant, "I was in Reedland last year on business the day your school played . . . and I got the football fever again . . . and went out to the game!"

Stuffy and Brick exchanged pleased glances, faces flushing.

"Then you—then you saw *us* play!" volunteered Stuffy.

"You don't say!" The lieutenant evidenced real interest. He glanced at the two youths shrewdly. "Don't tell me . . .! By jove! In the backfield, weren't you?"

The two members of the Big Three nodded, somewhat embarrassed.

"Mighty hot game, too!"

"Huh! Won't be a candle to what it'll be this year!" flashed Brick. "Reedland's out to get even for our beating her championship outfit last season . . . and we've already got some new scores to settle. If you want to see a *game*, come this year to Milford!"

The lieutenant laughed good-naturedly and promised that he would see if he could arrange it. Stuffy and Brick clambered from the plane and looked about hopefully for some sign of the custodian.

"We're quite a little way from Mr. Kirby's cabin," informed Lieutenant Alden, "and I haven't time to run down there this morning. I thought maybe the sound of the plane would bring Mr. Kirby up here if he is around. We'll wait a few minutes and if he doesn't appear I'll have to be taking the air again. Meanwhile I'll just pace off this field and see that there's no obstruction which might cause me trouble!"

Stuffy and Brick accompanied their aviator friend, lending what help they could in throwing stones and pieces of wood from the path that the plane would pursue in taking off. The lieutenant waited ten minutes, then—asking the boys to lay hold of the wings, one on a side, started the motor by whirling the propeller.

"If you see friend Kirby, give him my regards!" he shouted to Stuffy as he slipped into the cockpit.

The wind from the propeller now became a gale. Slowly, vibrantly, the plane began to move forward . . . Stuffy and Brick running along on each side. At a signal from Lieutenant Alden they released their holds and stood, spellbound, as the machine took on great speed . . . its wheels touching . . . lifting . . . touching . . . and then lifting to remain clear of the ground! The plane veered into the air, seeming to rise above the wall of trees which the boys had feared on descending, averting disaster by the narrowest of margins!

"Probably missed the trees a quarter of a mile!" guessed Stuffy. "But it sure looks close to us!"

"Now to find that custodian!" cried Brick. "Come on, we haven't any time to lose! Funny that he didn't show up! Maybe you got the wrong hunch after all on Mr. Kirby! If I was him I'd run from one end of my property to another to see an airplane!"

"That's all right," answered Stuffy, dryly, "but if you were at the other end of your prop-

erty from where the plane landed, you couldn't run to the other end in *nothing flat,* could you?"

"Meaning you think Mr. Kirby . . . or the custodian . . . may still be on the way?"

"Meaning that they *could* be!" said Stuffy, carefully.

Setting off across the field in the direction they knew the cabin to be from having seen it while in the air and from the top of Grand View Hill, the two youths had covered scarcely half the distance than they sighted the figure of the custodian. The figure gave the impression of having been in a hurry but it slowed up now, scanning that portion of the sky which still held the plane against it as a tiny, fast disappearing speck.

"You see!" exclaimed Stuffy, vindictively, nodding toward the custodian, "he *was* off somewhere! He made it as quickly as he could!"

"Yes . . . and do you realize the position *we're* in!" it suddenly occurred to Brick. *"We're trespassers!"*

"Holy smoke!" ejaculated Stuffy. "Oh, well, I guess we can explain easy enough. Anyway,

we had to take a chance like this in order to see this bird first!"

The man with the bearded face looked unusually gruff and stern as he approached. The two members of the Big Three had uncomfortable feelings of foreboding.

"How'd you boys get in here?" he demanded.

"By airplane, sir!" responded Stuffy.

"And Lieutenant Alden asked to be remembered to you . . . I mean—*Mr. Kirby!*" said Brick, blunderingly.

The man who had said he was the custodian, sized the young trespassers up shrewdly.

"Oh, I see . . . well, I'll tell Mr. Kirby," he answered, slowly. "Meanwhile, if you came by plane, would you mind stating your business?"

"That's just what we *want* to do!" declared Stuffy, eagerly. "Don't you remember us? We're two of the fellows from Milford who asked you, day before yesterday, if we could camp on this ground and *you* said . . .!"

"The bunch from Reedland's been trying to beat us out!" broke in Brick. "We went clear to Baldwin but Mr. Kirby wasn't there. We found out a lot about him, though, and . . .!"

"And we started back with some real proof!" took up Stuffy, "but Reedland got it away from us! That's why we landed here by airplane . . . so's we'd reach you before Reedland did . . .!"

"Because we think we really deserve the credit!" finished Brick, excitedly.

"Credit for what?" questioned the custodian, scratching his bearded chin, perplexedly.

Stuffy eyed the roughly dressed man in front of him, closely. Was he or wasn't he? How would that face look unshaven? Strikingly similar! Didn't make any difference whether the man would admit it or not . . . there was an undoubted likeness! But it would take nerve to fire the accusation. Stuffy drew a deep breath.

"*Credit!*" he heard himself repeating. "For discovering that the Mr. Kirby we were looking for is YOURSELF!"

The custodian stared at Stuffy a moment with an almost unbelieving expression. Then he threw back his head and laughed heartily.

"That's a good one!" he chuckled. "And you went to all this trouble just to . . .! Oh, that's rich!"

Stuffy and Brick exchanged sheepish glances.

"And what *is* this proof?" asked the custodian, when he had sobered a bit.

"I guess it doesn't make so much difference now!" said Stuffy, considerably crestfallen.

"Oh, I'll be very much interested to see it!" insisted the bearded personage. "Really!" he added, then gave way to laughter again. "Excuse me, boys . . . when I think . . . airplane and all! . . . Just wait till Mr. Kirby hears of this!"

The two members of Milford's Big Three began to edge away. Their only desire was to make as graceful an exit as possible.

"Here! Here!" called the custodian. "You're not going? . . . I'll walk to the gate with you!"

"If it would be just the same to you, sir," appealed Brick, "we'd rather get out some other way. You see the Reedland crowd's waiting at the gate with . . . with what we thought was the proof!"

"And you wouldn't care to have them see you?" surmised the custodian.

"We wouldn't exactly enjoy being the goats twice!" said Stuffy, considerably embarrassed. "Just the same, you and Mr. Kirby *do* look an awful lot alike!"

"Never heard that before!" said the custodian. "I'll tell you what . . . you fellows come along and sneak in from the side in that deep grass. There's some bushes up close to the gate and you can get in close to the fence without being seen from the road. I've had a good laugh at your expense . . . now maybe I can hand you a laugh at the other fellows' expense. Proof I'm Mr. Kirby! Ha! Ha! Ha! Pretty good!"

Brick glanced at the custodian awesomely.

"I'm beginning to think the guy's crazy!" he confided to Stuffy.

"He's got a crazy sense of humor, that's sure," admitted Stuffy. "We might as well do what he suggests, though. I *would* like to see that Reedland bunch get the turn-down! And they certainly will—on *our* evidence!"

Brick grinned, sickly.

"Yeah . . . that would be some consolation," he agreed.

In full sight of two youths, secreted behind a line of bushes near the fence inclosing the Kirby property, the custodian approached the gate before which was gathered a dusty but triumphant contingent from Reedland. Their leader, a powerfully built fellow, upon the custodian's ar-

rival, proudly produced a rather worn looking newspaper, pointed to a two-column cut, and emphatically declared: "That, sir, is a picture of you! And we've come back, Mr. Kirby, to ask your permission to camp on your property!"

It was funny now . . . extremely funny —to Stuffy and Brick. Where some moments before they had felt exceedingly chagrined, the tables were now effectively turned. To think that, after all the wild rivalry between Milford and Reedland . . . neither of them was to gain the objective! The latest clash was to end in a draw! Oh, well . . . it would be at least as satisfying as tie football games!

Mirthfully, Stuffy and Brick watched the custodian as he took the paper and examined the picture.

"Now for the let-down!" whispered Brick.

The custodian looked up and handed back the paper.

"You are clever boys," he complimented. "I *am* Mr. Kirby!"

"YEA!" shouted Reedland, with an outburst of tumultuous enthusiasm.

"*What?*" gasped Brick, sagging against Stuffy, "Catch me, I'm fainting!"

"The *old impostor!*" cried Stuffy.

Mr. Kirby raised his hand, motioning for silence.

"But you fellows from Reedland aren't quite clever enough," he finished. "Someone has beaten you to it!"

With that he turned toward the bushes and, winking at two dazed youths from Milford, bade them come forth.

People have been said to have dropped in their tracks from fright or surprise. Certainly the astonishment occasioned by this totally unexpected turn in events proved almost as shocking to a radiantly confident Reedland. The appearance of Stuffy and Brick, as if by magic, completely nonplussed Tim Norton, Reedland's outstanding foeman. Neither was it possible for him or his cohorts to conceal expressions of bewildered disappointment.

"We certainly want to thank you for presenting the evidence," grinned Stuffy, taking command of the situation as though he had been wise to it all along. "Without that newspaper we couldn't have proved Mr. Kirby's identity!"

"But how did you? . . . I don't see . . .!" started Tim, then stopped in confusion

as though the whole thing was too much for him.

"Sorry," reminded Mr. Kirby, smilingly, "but to the victor belong the spoils!"

"Oh, we're beaten all right," acknowledged the Reedland leader. "Fairly and squarely, too! . . . But only for the time being! Look out for us in football, Milford! We'll be right back after you STRONG!"

"And we'll be READY and WAITING for you . . . just like we were NOW!" challenged Brick.

Tim Norton nodded defiantly.

"Reedland wants to thank you, sir," he said, addressing Mr. Kirby, "for putting us on the track of a lot of fun. Trying to beat Milford out for the right to camp on your property was real sport and before we go we want to show you what we think of you!"

Almost before Tim had finished, Reedland had taken the cue and had broken into cheering. Mr. Kirby bowed appreciatively.

"See me next year," he invited, "You might have better luck!"

Then Reedland, with the spirit of true sportsmen, gave a mighty cheer for their rival—Milford! And, Tim Norton, shaking his fist good-

naturedly at Stuffy and Brick, as the Reedland bunch took their departure, cried out a threatening farewell: "Till we meet again!"

"Now, boys," said Mr. Kirby, when Reedland had disappeared beyond the bend, "where's the rest of your gang?"

"They're on the way here," informed Stuffy. "They ought to arrive a little before noon!"

"Good! I want you to be my guests at a beach party to-night in celebration of your victory. . . ." His eyes twinkled. "Your victory in finding *me!*"

"We—we'd be glad to!" accepted Brick, impulsively. "But . . . but, Mr. Kirby . . . can you explain one thing—who *is* the custodian here?"

Mr. Kirby pointed to himself.

"*I* am! That's one reason I grew a beard. I didn't care to be recognized. It's a long story that I'll tell you boys to-night . . . but in a nutshell it's this: the custodian that I hired last year was an accomplice to a gang of thieves. He let them onto my property secretly and they cut down valuable timber. I resolved, as a consequence, to play the rôle of custodian this season myself . . . and I've been having a perfectly wonderful time doing it!"

"I'll bet you have!" said Stuffy, admiringly. "You—you're just the kind who would!"

"All life is real sport if you only play it right," rejoined Mr. Kirby. "And it does me good to see that you boys have learned to do this already. Shall we go down to the lake now so you can pick out the place you'd like to camp and get it ready for your comrades?"

Stuffy and Brick nodded, a bit too overcome for words, and fell in beside the bearded man, no longer a stranger to them but a warm-hearted friend. And somehow, right then, this last Milford victory over Reedland seemed far greater than the ones which had been greeted by cheering crowds and sport-mad newspapers.

"We've made a real touchdown this time!" murmured Brick, as he glimpsed the lake through the trees. "Here's going to be sport that is sport."

"You said it!" echoed Stuffy.

And later on, when the Milford gang arrived, *they* said it . . . and kept *on* saying it until Mr. Kirby said that all wild things in the woods would be saying good-by if they didn't stop. So they stopped—for a couple of minutes!

CHAPTER VII

A PROPOSITION IS MADE

"Come on, snap out of it! The coach says for you birds to show more pep. This is a fine precedent to set on the first night of football practice! What you guys think you're dolling up for—an afternoon tea?"

It was Beef Mellon talking and his bulky figure comfortably filled the outer door to the Milford High locker room as he called inside to fellow team-mates, busy dressing.

"Now don't be getting sarcastic!" warned Jim Hemming. "Just because you were rated the best center in the state and we took a notion to elect you captain is no reason for you to get on and ride. We refuse to be ridden!"

"That's telling him!" seconded Stuffy. "How'd you get into your togs so quick, anyway? Must have had 'em all sorted before hand!"

"System," grinned Beef, leaning against the doorjamb. "System!"

"Bah!" snorted Pepper, feeling around inside his locker. "Luck, that's all! Say, Brick . . . seen anything of my other shoe?"

Brick Mitchell, third member of what had been Milford High's famous Freshman trio, glanced up from his own troubles with a frown. "Naw, what would I be doing with your other shoe? Have *you* seen anything of my jersey?"

"Never mind all your duds, gang," pleaded Captain Mellon, shifting his beefy frame impatiently. "Get out for roll call the way you are. There's not going to be any dress parade to-day!"

"*You* should hand us *that* line!" reprimanded Merle Conway. "*You* who've even got your shoulder pads on!"

"How sweet *I'd* look trotting out for roll call!" scoffed Joe Kline. "*Me,* who's got no pants!"

Howls of laughter at this!

"I've got an extra pair," obliged Beef, moving from the door toward his locker.

"No, thanks!" refused Joe, emphatically. "I don't wear tents!"

More howls!

"Well, I like *that!*" objected Captain Mellon with all his two hundred and twenty odd

pounds. "So that's the kind of gratitude . . .!"

"Doesn't have anything to do with gratitude," interrupted Milford's left tackle. "It's latitude, man,—*latitude!* I'd feel about as much at home in your pants as a giraffe would feel wearing one of my collars!"

The captain of Milford High's football team looked down upon his pantless team-member with an injured expression.

"I don't see the connection at all," he said, finally. "Where'd you ever get the idea that I was suggesting for you to wear my pants around your neck?"

"Ow . . . oooh!"

"Throw featherweight out!"

"This is too much!"

Three pairs of hands laid hold of Beef Mellon, none too gently. The hands were owned by Stuffy, Pepper and Brick, respectively, and together they formed the motive force which propelled the resisting team captain out of the locker room into the crisp air of a late autumn afternoon. This done the three chums turned about to finish dressing as sympathetic comrades broke into cheers.

"Yea, Big Three, Yea!"

"Fellow members," addressed Joe Kline, with a grateful glance in the direction of the Big Three, "I call upon you to lament over your failure to elect Stuffy Owen captain in place of Beef. Stuffy should never have been permitted to duck this honor. Witness how we are being insulted and brow-beaten by that big piece of cheese who . . .!"

"How's that, brother Kline?" asked a sweetly nice voice, as a pudgy face reappeared at the door.

"What am I going to do without my pants?" wailed the left tackle, evasively, jumping up to look in other lockers. "Somebody's got my pants!"

"So I'm a big piece of cheese, am I? Boy, wait till we start scrimmage! If I don't pass over you like a steam roller!"

"That's right, Beef," sympathized Stuffy, "I'm with you now. Any guy who'd insinuate that I'd make a better captain than you . . ."

"Thanks, Mister Owen, thanks!" beamed Beef, with a condescending bow. "That is just what I was thinking of remarking . . . but my natural modesty, of course . . ."

"Razzberries!"

Captain Mellon swallowed artfully. "Sorry, boys, they're out of season. But I have . . ."

"My pants!" shrilled Joe Kline, holding up a disreputable looking garment which he had pulled from the end locker. "What do you know about that—my pants!"

"All right, gang!" called Pepper, assuming the rôle of cheer leader. "Now all together . . .!"

"Rah, rah, rah!
Rah, rah, rah!
His pants!
His pants!
His pants!"

"The day is saved," added Brick. "I've just found my jersey, too! Oh, darn! . . . The moths have gotten in it!"

"What a swell looking outfit this is going to be!" aired Merle Conway, who had played right half. "I haven't got two socks the same color . . . and yet I'd have sworn I closed my locker last fall on a perfect set of togs!"

"Lack of system!" harped Beef. "Now if you fellows had let me . . .!"

"Everybody out!" ordered Stuffy, picking up a stray shoe and heaving at his captain.

"Hey, that's mine!" yelled Pepper, making a dive for the leather foot-covering to prevent Beef from hurling it back at his chum. "That's the shoe I've been looking for!"

"Well, for the love of . . .!"

"Come on, Beef, snap it up!" mocked Stuffy, as he and fellow players crowded the door. "The coach says for you to show more pep! The idea of your being the last one out on the first night of practice!"

Milford High, conquerors of the mighty Reedland, in that never-to-be-forgotten last season clash, was fortunate in having practically every member of the team back as a nucleus around which to build this season's eleven. Victory over Reedland had given Milford the title of state champions and, from Reedland's vow to win the title back on the next meeting, Milford had cause to rejoice that most of the fellows who had won the crown would be on hand to defend it. Graduation had taken five of Reedland's much respected varsity, but all last season Reedland had been noted for the great power of her second team, and this, added to the mighty veteran, Tim Norton, assured just as stiff opposition as ever from Milford's

long-standing rival. Reedland would not soon recover from the shock of losing to the much under-rated Milford eleven after having enjoyed the confidence of annexing a state championship for the second time in succession. Oh, what a score Reedland had to settle! And would Reedland settle it? Just wait!

That night following practice, Stuffy, Pepper and Brick left the locker room together, as was their custom. When alone, Pepper turned to Brick and asked, mischievously: "Well, Brick, going to compete against me for quarterback position again?"

"Nothing stirring!" answered Brick, positively. "That little taste I got of playing left half didn't seem half bad to me . . ."

"So you don't think playing half's bad?" punned Stuffy, poking his chum, guyingly.

"There's going to be no more friction among us musketeers!" declared Brick. "Anyway, I admit that Pepper's a better quarterback than I'd have made . . ."

"Guess I'll go out for left half!" suggested Pepper, with a wink at Stuffy.

"Huh! Just you try it!" warned Brick. "If you want to start a . . . er . . . a . . . a swell left half you'd make!"

"Stepped on your corns, didn't he?" laughed Stuffy. "Well, to avoid any more sore toes and keep this mutual admiration society from further wrangling, I'm here to announce that, in our regular positions we're everything that belongs to the cat—eyebrows, whiskers, four legs and tail!"

"Absolutely!" joshed Pepper.

"Not strong enough," protested Brick. "What we're going to do in football this season will take a lot of new adjectives to describe!"

"Providing, of course, that we make the team," observed Stuffy, dryly.

"And if we keep on talking like this, one adjective will be plenty," prophesied Pepper. "That adjective'll be 'rotten'!"

"There you go, Old Serious Minded, giving us lecture number ninety-nine! So afraid we'll get the big head, aren't you?"

"Well, we haven't been vaccinated against it, have we? You'll have to admit we're all pretty sure of landing as regulars in the backfield this season. We're having a hard time forgetting what we did toward winning the Reedland game last year. And we sort of like being pointed out as Milford's Big Three, don't we?"

Brick's face flushed. He gave his chum a questioning glance.

"You're kidding!"

"Not much! Wish I was! Oh, I know I chimed in after what Stuffy said about us being the cat's tootsies or something like that . . . but, honest, fellows—I think this is a mighty good time to look ourselves in the face and make a little resolution to watch our step. It's so easy to get on a high horse without realizing it."

Stuffy and Brick regarded each other, soberly.

"Pep's right," said Stuffy. "I'm glad he brought it up. We've got to go careful this year. Be a good stunt if we agreed to keep tab on each other and break the news if we find that any of us is growing a bigger hat band."

"How are we going to know it?" asked Brick.

"Ho, we'll know it all right!" answered Pepper. "Only I hope we see the symptoms before anyone else does, if our heads ever should start to swell. I'd rather have either of you two fellows tell me about it than hear somebody on the outside telling somebody else!"

The three chums came to a stop at the alley-

way leading in past the Mitchell backyard. This was the short cut route which Stuffy and Brick usually took, parting at this juncture from Pepper.

"That all you've got on your chest?" queried Brick, eyeing the pal who had beaten him out for the quarterback position.

Pepper nodded, his face relaxing in a smile.

"Perhaps I *am* too serious-minded," he apologized, "but, gee, fellows . . . I've seen so many birds get puffed up just because . . . because . . . well, it doesn't make any difference what they got puffed up over. I can't help remembering what good old Hoops Miller said when we were going out for the baseball team. How he tipped us off that the coach was tickled we were eligible to play and warned us to 'hold onto our hatbands.' Milford never had a finer athlete than Hoops . . . or a better loved fellow . . . and that's because he was so modest. We want to be well liked, too! We want folks to talk about us after we've finished high school and tell about what we've done . . . and praise us up . . . and mean it! And that's why I've busted out like I did just now, pals. I busted out because . . . because, right down in my

heart, I've begun to think I'm pretty good!"

Pepper hung his head shamefacedly and kicked a toe in the sod beside the cement walk. It has been said that an honest confession is good for the soul. Pepper's sudden admission served as a jolt to Stuffy and Brick. They regarded their chum curiously. A moment of embarrassed silence followed which was broken by Stuffy's placing an arm about Pepper's shoulders and exclaiming: "Pep, you're daffy! You're so darned afraid that you're going to be stuck up, you're overdoing it the other way! Say, you want to look out! I believe you've got an inferiority complex!"

Soon all three chums were laughing and joking. They were about to go their several ways when hailed by a stranger to the town—Edwin Kirby! It was the first time they had seen him since Milford's most enjoyable sojourn on his premises and all were, naturally, delighted.

"Hello, Big Three!" greeted Mr. Kirby, warmly. "Been practicing football?"

"Yeah," answered Stuffy. "Little workout. Didn't amount to much to-night . . . just got limbered up a bit. May I ask what brings you to Milford?"

"Business!" smiled Mr. Kirby. "You boys

have convinced me I ought to pay more attention to your town! Say,—maybe it's rather early but I'm going to grab this opportunity of speaking to you while I've got you all together. I'm lining up a special exhibit of my fowls for the county fair—the first exhibit I've ever made here. It takes place the week of October twenty-fifth and I'm wondering if I could hire you fellows to help me?"

The three chums exchanged consulting glances.

"Help you—how?" asked Stuffy, "you know we'd be mighty glad to do anything we could for *you*, sir—without the *hiring!*"

"That's very kind but I couldn't permit *that!* I'm trying to work up a novelty," explained Mr. Kirby, "and the idea hit me that, if I could get your permission to name my three prize roosters after your nicknames and get out some pamphlets and put you fellows in charge of the booth to sort of give life to the stunt, that my display would attract considerable attention."

"Oh, I—I see," said Stuffy, after a slight pause.

"I'd pay you well," promised Mr. Kirby. "It would be worth fifty dollars apiece to me during fair week . . . for afternoon and eve-

ning work. The school's always closed afternoons that week, you know . . . and I'd let you off, of course, for the time you'd take in football practice. Besides, the fair ground's right next to Brinkley Field where you play and you fellows could dress in the back part of the booth those days the fair was on so you could save time going clear down to the locker room and back. What do you say?"

"Sounds good to me!"

"Fifty dollars for *that?*"

"You're cheating yourself, Mr. Kirby!"

The chicken fancier smiled.

"Not at all. You boys are well known throughout the region. There are lots of folks who would like to get a close-up of you. And I figure when they see the booth all fixed up, football style, and my roosters named Stuffy, Pepper and Brick . . . they'll get a big laugh . . . at the same time being quite impressed with my display. The booth will be just as big a boost for Milford High and the team as it will be for my poultry! And that's what I want. I'm planning to use school colors across the front and rig up an imaginary football field for my poultry to run in and . . . well, wait till all my ideas get hatched out!

We'll have the best exhibit at the fair!"

The enthusiasm of the chums began to mount. The county affair in Milford was always one of the events of the year. It would be great fun to take part in the conducting of a booth. And, beyond the fun, think of fifty dollars apiece! The things fifty dollars would buy! What a proposition! To get handsomely paid for work which would be a pleasure! Mr. Kirby was crazy. He need not have offered any money at all; they would have been glad to have donated their services. But, seeing as how he was willing to pay. . . .

"There's just one thing," the chicken fancier cautioned, after the Big Three had accepted his proposal, "I don't want you boys to mention this to a soul. This idea is to be sprung as a big surprise at the opening of the fair and it's got to be kept mum!"

"Trust us," assured Stuffy, speaking for Pepper and Brick as well as himself. "We'll keep it so mum you'll be lucky to know much about it yourself!"

Mr. Kirby laughed and shook hands all around, expressing his thanks to the boys for their willingness to coöperate.

"I'll be over here occasionally from now on

and will get in touch with you about a week before the fair," he advised, in parting; "at that time I'll line you up on the whole stunt."

The moment Mr. Kirby had passed out of hearing, Stuffy, Pepper and Brick fell to excitedly discussing the astounding offer.

"Gee! . . . Do our names mean *that* much?" asked Brick, almost unbelievingly.

"Evidently do to him," answered Stuffy.

"Hmmmm!" speculated Pepper, in a pleased tone.

CHAPTER VIII

CONWAY GETS SORE

The first weeks of football training are quite often more drudgery than enjoyment. These weeks carry a certain suspense, too, for it is during this period of time that all candidates are on trial. Later, when the squad has been reduced to a tentative first and second team and the preliminary games are crowding the calendar, a much more settled attitude exists in the minds of all. But it is the stretch of practice evenings before the ax has fallen which most affects young hopefuls. Of course the veterans on the squad possess an amount of confidence, due to past experience, which enables them to conceal any evidence of concern they may have over landing their same positions again.

This year, as Coach Dolan scrutinized a field of sixty boys from which to pick the eleven to represent Milford, he could not refrain from an audible exclamation of elation.

"Jove, what material!"

If Reedland had been swamped with football talent at the start of last season, Milford certainly was equally blessed this year. Reedland's strong reserves would now largely comprise the first team but Milford shaped up, from material available, as possessing two men for every position . . . men who could play these positions creditably.

At the end of three weeks, Coach Dolan had trimmed the squad down to thirty-three members. Beyond this he declared that he did not intend to go, for every one of the thirty-three survivors was considered well worth developing. In picking his players for the season's opening game with Bloomsburg, Coach Dolan named two for each position, following out a plan which the Reedland coach had put into effect last year when also embarrassed by a large quantity of good material. This embarrassment, however, was the kind that a coach liked! Stuffy was listed as fullback; Pepper, as quarterback; Brick, as left half, and Merle Conway, as right half. Alternates for these positions were announced respectively as Joe Kline, who had played left tackle last season when beaten out by Stuffy for a backfield berth; Morris Fitzgerald, one of Milford's baseball

men, new to the game of football, but who had shown surprising aptitude at quarterback; Pete Arrick, whom Brick had supplanted at left half last season when Pete had sprained an ankle; and Bert Phillpot, who was son of Ben Phillpot, Milford's chief of police, a fellow who would keep Merle Conway stepping to hold right half position.

Competition!

"The harder the boys have to fight to win their places on the team, the better players they are going to be," Coach Dolan had said once. "And, even after they have won their positions, it is a good thing to keep them constantly harried by the threat of being removed for other men just as good!"

Sounded somewhat harsh, perhaps, but Coach Dolan was essentially *not* a driver. Seventeen years as athletic instructor at Milford High had equipped him with a first-hand knowledge of boys, however,—a knowledge which prompted him to do many things that the casual observer might have criticized, not understanding. For instance, during all the squabble that Pepper and Brick had gone through last fall, Coach Dolan had wisely refrained from taking a hand. Long experience had taught him that boys could

best settle their own disputes and that interference only added to the strife.

"Life has its hard knocks just like football," Coach Dolan often remarked, "and it's no use trying to save fellows from getting bumped. Lots of times they deserve just what they get and it's a good thing for them to find this out!"

In the game with Bloomsburg, the Milford coach experimented with various combinations in the line as well as the backfield. The Bloomsburg eleven furnished even less opposition than usual, succumbing to Milford by the smothering score of eighty-six to nothing! Bloomsburg served the excellent purpose, however, of affording its larger and stronger rival an afternoon of valuable practice. In the backfield, Coach Dolan did considerable juggling with his alternates. Kline went in for Stuffy at the beginning of the second quarter; Stuffy came back into the game at the start of the second half, but Brick was now on the sidelines with Arrick playing in his place; in the last quarter, Fitzgerald took up Pepper's job at quarterback; Phillpot subbed for Conway and Stuffy again went out to give Kline a chance.

Commenting on the season's opening game,

the Monday afternoon *Milford Eagle* said, in part:

"An outstanding feature of Milford High's crushing victory over Bloomsburg was the work of Stuffy Owen, Pepper Lawton, and Brick Mitchell, better known as Milford's Big Three. Though this trio was only in the line-up together during the first quarter, it was directly accountable for the scoring of six touchdowns in that period and a total of forty points. No other combinations worked so smoothly or with anywhere near the driving power exhibited by Coach Dolan's original selection. Even with alternate members of the trio removed from play, those left in the game continued to give superlative accounts of themselves, tearing off gain after gain through the line or around the ends. It is the opinion of this sports writer that Milford High has never been represented by a stronger alliance in the backfield and the power which was hinted at in the performance of the Big Three against Reedland last year will undoubtedly show to full advantage this season. Coach Dolan's second choices, Kline, Fitzgerald, Arrick and Phillpot—every one ordinarily good enough to comprise a Milford High backfield—must bow this season to a great quartette, the Big Three plus Merle Conway, three year veteran. Indeed, so inspiring was the performance of these four that they might aptly be referred

"SAY, PEP, DON'T YOU THINK IT WOULD BE A GOOD IDEA TO LET ME CARRY THE BALL A LITTLE MORE?"

to as 'The Four Horsemen of Milford High'!"

"Boys, what a send-off!" Stuffy exclaimed, as he read the sport item.

"The Four Horsemen!" gasped Brick, looking over Stuffy's shoulder. "Gee, we *must* be good!"

"Look out!" warned Pepper. "Those may be the *high* horses I was telling you about! That story's ridiculous. Anybody'd looked like a cyclone against Bloomsburg. That is . . . anybody with any zip at all. Four horsemen! Say, when we hit a real team they may take to calling us mule-drivers!"

"That's all right," protested Stuffy. "But you'll have to admit that we showed mighty good form for the opening game . . . the plays went off like clockwork. . . ."

"And it's a fact that the team didn't play as well when we weren't all in the game!" added Brick, with a trace of pride.

"Sure, sure . . . I admit that," smiled Pepper, backing off defensively. "But we *ought* to have played better. We're more used to each other's style. Wait till Joe and Fitz and the rest get onto working with us. Then . . .!"

"There can't anybody work with us like we can work with ourselves!" broke in Brick. "We proved that in baseball!"

"Why get excited?" asked Pepper, quietly. "We evidently proved it in football, too, or the coach wouldn't have picked us intact. All I meant was, we're not necessarily any better players than the others . . . we're just picked because of our experience in playing together . . . and as soon as they . . . or if . . ."

"Not in a million years!" objected Stuffy, "You can't line up three fellows who fit so well together as we do. If you could there'd be lots more backfields in the country that would stand out. Look at the hard time Coach Rockne's had trying to develop a new group of Four Horsemen!"

"Watch that hatband! Watch that hatband!" cautioned Pepper, "Permit me to be the first one to remind you . . ."

"Fiddlesticks!" mumbled Stuffy, confusedly, "That's not being stuck up! Facts are facts!"

The following Saturday Milford journeyed to Navin City to meet Navin High. Advance reports on Navin had it that Milford's second

opponent would prove a worthy foe this season. And Navin did succeed in putting up some genuine resistance during the first quarter. In addition to keeping Milford from the goal line, the Navin fullback wrote his name in his school's annals by drop-kicking a field goal from Milford's thirty-seven yard line. But this was Navin's high point of effort. Coach Dolan, who had started the game against Navin with his entire second team, trotted out the first string men for the second quarter. It was then that the romp began. At the end of the first half Milford was enjoying a lead of 21 to 3, thanks to two touchdowns by Stuffy and one by Brick.

As the players crouched in a circle under blankets, waiting for the whistle which would call them back on the field for the second half, Merle Conway edged around to Pepper and addressed the member of Milford's Big Three in an undertone.

"Say, Pep, don't you think it would be a good idea to let me carry the ball a little more?"

"How's that?"

The question had come so suddenly, Pepper could hardly believe his ears. He looked into the eyes of Conway, who had been catcher on the baseball team and was now the oldest vet-

eran on the football team except Captain Beef Mellon, with whom he was tied. Both of these players were in their last year at school and would be four letter men. What did Conway mean—insinuating that he was not being called on enough to carry the ball? Stuffy and Brick, near by, noticing the strained expression on Pepper's face, bent forward curiously in the hopes that they might overhear what was being said.

"You heard me!" snapped Conway. "I've not been getting a fair break and you know it. Please don't forget that I'm in that backfield after this!"

The whistle!

"All right, fellows!" called Coach Dolan "No changes this quarter. Let's see what you can do!"

On the way out to positions, Stuffy and Brick fell in beside Pepper.

"What the dickens is biting Merle?" asked Stuffy, guardedly.

Pepper glanced ahead to be sure that Conway was not looking.

"He's crabbing because he says I've been favoring you and Brick," Pepper informed.

"What? Well, the nerve of that guy!" exploded Brick indignantly.

"Huh!" snorted Stuffy, "I wouldn't have thought that of Con. Why, he—he must be *jealous!*"

"Give the little boy the ball!" ordered Brick. "If you're going to do any favoring—favor him!"

This, Pepper did. On practically every other play, the Milford quarterback was seen to give the ball to his right half for plunges through the line or dashes around the ends. At first the right half responded with some splendidly executed gains, squirming through the line on one occasion for seventeen yards and ripping twenty-two yards off around right end on another. Milford rooters, who had accompanied the team, broke into a din of cheering.

"Yea, Conway! Yea, Conway! Yea! Yea! Yea!"

Conway had taken the ball from kick-off and, almost alone, had fought it down to within the shadow of Navin's goal posts. A first down for Milford on their opponent's six yard line! Touchdown to make!

"Good boy, Merle!" Pepper shouted in Con-

way's ear, as the team lined up for the final drive. "Take her across!"

Milford's right half shot into action again but, this time, Navin broke through and set him back for a yard loss. Second down, seven yards to go.

"Signals!" shrilled the snappy Milford quarter. "Eight—twelve—one—"

The Milford fullback and left half exchanged knowing winks. This play called for the right half carrying the ball just outside the left end position. Conway had gone great guns so far. Let him finish what he had started!

"Four!"

The ball snapped back and the opposing lines came together. Stuffy and Brick swung in as interference for the man with the ball. But Conway, obviously tired from the heavy demands which had been made upon him, was slow in getting going. He was hit by two tacklers and dropped with a bare yard gain.

"Tough luck!" sympathized Pepper.

"What's the matter with you?" blazed Conway. "I didn't mean . . .!"

"Signals!" shouted the quarterback.

The Milford right half, panting for breath, stumbled back into position, glaring. On the

sidelines, Coach Dolan scratched his chin perplexedly. What on earth was Pepper up to? Didn't he realize that no player could . . . Why, the boy was crazy! Conway's number again! A drive at the line between right guard and right tackle! Groans as the Milford right half gained but a scant yard. Great cheers from the Navin fans. Their team had taken a brace!

"Time out!"

Conway lay where he had fallen, breathless. Jim Hemming, Milford right end, grasped his comrade just above the hips and lifted his body up and down to aid in giving air. Captain Beef Mellon took his quarterback aside.

"See here, Pep! What you trying to do? That's the third time in a row you've shoved Con the ball!"

"He asked for it!" snapped Pepper. "Accused me of showing favoritism . . .!"

"Forget it!" fired the usually genial Mellon. "You've got Con wrong. He's not the kind that would want to hog it. If he said anything to you he just meant to mix 'em up more. Use your head a little, Pep! *Use your head!*"

As the game was resumed, Coach Dolan sent Pete Arrick racing from the sidelines to take

Brick's place in the backfield. Arrick bore a message for the quarterback.

"Coach Dolan says to lay off Conway. You're overworking him!"

Pepper made no answer. It was Milford's last down. If the team failed to score from this distance on four tries at goal, it would reflect upon his generalship.

"Come on, gang!" he cried. "Let's go! Let's take her across!"

The play upon which Pepper decided to rely for a counter was a feint attack by the left tackle on the right side of the line and the fullback making the real attack at left guard position. As the ball snapped back, Holman—left tackle—started as if to carry the ball to the right; Pepper turned, faking a pass to Holman, then wheeled and passed to Stuffy, who came charging through. An opening was made for him in the line by Arrick, but it was Conway who blocked two tacklers off after the line had been pierced, which made it possible for Stuffy to crash over for a touchdown—his third of the game!

"Yea, Stuffy!" yelled the Milfordites. "Yea! Yea! Yea!"

"Isn't he a whiz?" exclaimed an admiring spectator. "They should have given him the ball before!"

The Milford fullback proceeded to win more credit by drop-kicking goal for the point after touchdown, increasing his team's lead by the score of 28 to 3. At the end of the quarter, Coach Dolan sent in three other members of his alternate backfield, the substitution—in the instance of one Merle Conway—being greatly appreciated. And, for the last fifteen minutes of the game, supporters of the home town team took joy in the fact that the visitors were held from doing further scoring.

In the trip back to Milford after the game, members of the Big Three counseled with one another.

"You did dead right!" encouraged Stuffy, as Pepper indicated that he felt remorseful for what he had done.

"Sure you did!" seconded Brick. "Connie's head was beginning to swell. Say, I'll bet he ate green apples when Stuffy took the ball over in one play after he failed on three tries! Boy, you certainly gave him the cure!"

"Well," said Pepper, reluctantly, "I really

hadn't meant to favor you guys—if I had been doing it—and it made me good and sore . . .!"

"He thinks he's entitled to special consideration because he's played on so many Milford teams!" derided Brick. "Can you beat that? Takes a long time for the smallness in some fellows to creep out, doesn't it? And here I'd always figured Con as *regular!*"

"You had *some* premonition about hatbands, didn't you?" joshed Stuffy, giving Pepper a playful shove. "Only the premonition didn't apply to us!"

Pepper sat, looking out the train window as lights from farmhouses blinked past in the darkness. Forty more minutes to Milford. There'd be a crowd of home folks at the station to welcome the team back. And there'd be a great deal of lionizing. Stuffy would come in for particular praise as the high scorer—three touchdowns and four perfect goals for points after touchdown. Brick, too! He'd done some sensational work. It suddenly occurred to Pepper how unfair the giving out of credit for football victories actually was. The stars of the game were shouted to the skies . . . and the other fellows weren't mentioned

by name . . . except as they were included in yells for "Team!"

Pepper turned back to his chums, clearing his throat, huskily.

"I don't know," he said, "I—I can't help feeling a bit sorry for Conway!"

And Stuffy and Brick, unable to appreciate the thoughts which had prompted Pepper to make this declaration, could only stare at their pal in dumb amazement.

CHAPTER IX

PEPPER HAS HIS TROUBLES

It is surprising how quickly a little germ of ill feeling, if nursed along, can develop proportions approaching an epidemic. The three chums may have thought that they had given Conway "the cure," as Brick put it, after Milford's right half had charged Pepper with showing favoritism in the choice of plays which did not concern him, but—the school's backfield veteran was *far* from cured! He was a smoldering furnace inside.

The first night of practice back at Brinkley field, substitute backfield men sidled up to Conway, plying him with carefully addressed questions. All surmised the nature of the trouble that he had had with Milford's Big Three but each wanted to hear the story from Conway's own lips. Kline, Arrick, Fitzgerald and Phillpot were mightily interested in what had occurred because of the possibility of the same thing happening to them. If Pepper, as quar-

terback, had been treating Conway unfairly and giving Stuffy and Brick all the breaks, it stood to reason that he would make it hard for any other man who was sent into the backfield to work with the Big Three.

"We noticed how he called on you to carry the ball at the last," sided in Joe Kline, Stuffy's alternate for fullback position. "You were lucky to make as many yards as you did. He figured to queer you right there!"

"I don't know what he figured," answered Conway. "but it sure was a dumb thing to do. After the first few plays, Navin was all set for me. It was useless to try to gain. I might as well have tried to jump the Grand Canyon in a Ford."

"And then, after he'd made you look bad," supplied Arrick, "he gave the ball to Stuffy and sent him over for a touchdown . . .!"

"A touchdown that your interference made possible!" emphasized Phillpot, Conway's understudy. "I know that play. I saw you block those two Navin . . .!"

"Pipe down!" cautioned Conway. "Here comes Pep now!"

Hostile glances were directed at the Milford quarterback as he passed. These glances Pep-

per appeared not to notice. There was to be no scrimmage to-night. There never was any scrimmage the first night of practice after a game. But the session was to end with a little talk by the coach. And speculation was running high as to the comments that Coach Dolan would have to make on Milford's battle with Navin City.

"Someone's going to get burnt!" prophesied Slim Mooney, school wit. "I'm not any closer to the team than a yell leader but even *I* can see that there's something up! Which means that it's got to be pretty darned obvious!"

Mooney was right. There could be no concealing of the fact that certain members of Milford High's football eleven were considerably "up in the air." This agitation did not need to have been expressed any further than among themselves. Their actions, in this case, had spoken many words to close observers. Coach Dolan could hardly avoid a rapidly rising issue. This ill feeling would have to be openly branded and stamped upon. So thought those who were aware of what was transpiring. A pity that members of a team which had shown such great promise, should be at "outs" with one another! The offenders should be taken

across the coach's knee and their petty grievances spanked out of them. No sense in their disrupting a whole team for the purpose of satisfying personal vanity!

"Boys," said Coach Dolan, addressing Milford's first and second elevens as they sat bunched together on a lower tier of seats beside the field, "about that Navin City game . . .!"

A palpable indrawing of breath went the rounds. Here was the moment which had been anticipated! Here was the time when certain individuals would be scorched alive. The Big Three, especially. They had it coming to them. Any three fellows who thought they were. . . !

". . . Of course you all know that the system of play I teach does not call for piling up top-heavy scores just because it can be done," resumed the coach, amid the nervous clearing of throats. "But I *do* feel, considering the opportunities afforded and the relative strength of Navin City and Milford, that you boys should have turned in a better score. Twenty-eight to three is disgraceful! Outside of the second quarter, when you put across three touchdowns, you played like dubs. The third

quarter was terrible. This was largely due to poor handling. What was the matter, Pep—did you suddenly forget Stuffy and Brick were in the backfield?"

All eyes turned on the member of Milford's Big Three. Coach Dolan was about to strike at rock bottom. Knowing winks were exchanged between substitute backfield men Merle Conway turned his head away, self-consciously. Pepper's face flushed. He was slow in answering.

"N-no, sir," he said, finally, "I . . .!" and checked himself.

"You, *what?*" persisted the coach.

"I . . ." hesitated Pepper, glancing at Stuffy and Brick, "I . . . nothing!"

"The whole team was off form," said Coach Dolan, after a shrewd look about the squad. "You played as though your hearts weren't very much in the game. This applied particularly to the backfield. Such an attitude, against stronger teams, would have proved fatal. You acted woefully disorganized at times, were slow getting under way, and never sure of where you were going when you did get started. You've got to learn to get on your toes and keep on

'em. This week's going to see more team play and less individual effort!"

Was this all? Dumbly the players sat, awaiting more. This was mild, far too mild for what had been deserved. The coach had apparently been on the verge of saying something pertinent several times. But now he was dismissing the squad for the night with the casual order to "Jog it all the way in to the locker room!"

And not a word had he uttered about the growing sore on Milford High's championship hopes! Not a word about a situation which was calculated to threaten dire consequences unless curtailed! Could the coach actually be blind? No, this was incredible! Anyone who had eyes. . . . It was just that . . . well . . . any other coach, perhaps—but NOT Coach Dolan! Those who had presumed he would discuss the matter might have known. He was treating it as he had treated all others of like nature—treating it by *ignoring* it! The boys knew what was wrong without being told. He would point out their playing weaknesses but not the causes . . . when these causes had their foundation in attitudes of hatred or spite or jealousy, and similar feelings. Then

if, made conscious of the way these attitudes were affecting team play, the offenders still preferred to let their feelings run riot—they must suffer the penalties, however severe. To Coach Dolan, the greatest lesson to be gained from athletic competition was the exercise of self-control. And this lesson could not be learned second-handed. The boys must meet their own issues squarely.

"What was the matter, Pep?" demanded Brick, when the Big Three had regained their street clothes and were on their way home. "Why didn't you come right out when the coach asked you and tell him about Conway? You saw what happened, didn't you? You got the credit for the team's poor showing!"

Pepper trudged along a few paces silently.

"I had half a notion to speak up for you," added Stuffy. "It didn't seem right . . ."

"I'm glad you didn't," broke in Pepper. "I didn't treat Conway fair, calling on him to carry the ball like that . . . and I—I'm going to apologize!"

"You! . . . What?"

"You heard me. It's the only thing to do."

"But *he* started it! He asked you to give him the ball more . . . and you *did!*"

"Doesn't make any diff. I—we shouldn't have gotten hot just because he . . . because he thought we were hogging the play."

Stuffy and Brick crowded their chum off the walk.

"Say, Pep, your heart's as soft as corn meal mush!" reproved Brick. "You'd let a fellow knock you down and do a Charleston on you and when he got through you'd beg his pardon because you couldn't offer a very smooth surface for dancing. For John's sake, get some spunk up!"

Pepper pushed himself back on the walk.

"I can't stay mad unless I'm sure I'm right," he said, quietly. "Coach Dolan trusts every fellow to play square. I'll feel better when I've spoken to Conway."

"Then by all means—do it!" urged Stuffy. "Though it seems to me that Merle's the boy who ought to have the guilty conscience!"

It was not until Thursday night that Pepper found a chance to speak to Milford's right half alone. Then it was only for a moment in a corner of the locker room.

"Say, Merle!" he called, in a low voice, as Conway was about to pass. "Here a second, will you?"

The veteran backfield man came over, brows lowering inquiringly.

"Well . . .?"

"I'm sorry about last week. It—it won't happen again."

Conway looked his surprise, then a flood of color came to his cheeks, his jaws hardened, and he gave savage retort: "No, you bet it won't! *I'll* see to that!"

Several minutes later the group of backfield substitutes were gathered about the Milford right half.

"Yes, sir!" Conway told them. "Pep didn't make any bones about it. He confessed that he'd been favoring Stuffy and Brick!"

Harwell High was the next scheduled game, a home game, too. The townspeople were showing an unusual interest in Milford this season because of the reported strength of the team and also because the mighty Reedland was to be met on Brinkley Field. When Reedland came to Milford the town forgot its occupations and the inhabitants took up residence along the sidelines. Victories over Reedland were celebrated with twice the fervor of an old time Fourth of July and, this year, because

Reedland had threatened to regain her lost crown at all costs, Milford was planning to support the home team as never before. Much store continued to be laid on the expected exploits of Milford's Big Three. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick's performances thus far had been all that could be desired by the town-at-large. And, as yet, Milford folks were quite unaware that any friction existed within the team. In fact, the *Milford Eagle* had even reported that the prospects never looked "more rosy." Such a declaration undoubtedly looked nice in print to the uninformed but players, reading it, must have had many secret misgivings.

The situation which confronted Pepper at the starting of the game with Harwell was certainly one not to be envied. He went into the contest with his mind greatly troubled. He was sincerely anxious to do the right thing and resolved to call signals impartially, regardless of the players in the backfield or his particular friendship for Stuffy and Brick. But he was also conscious of the suspicion with which his every move would be regarded by the substitute backs and—Conway.

Captain Beef Mellon, center, won the toss and elected to receive. Both teams prepared for the

kick-off, Harwell showing a tendency to nervousness. Word was passed around that the Harwell coach had trained his team for this battle in the hopes that Harwell might score an upset against the "number one eleven of the state." For Harwell, the clash with Milford would be her big game of the season. Six hundred rooters who had traveled to Milford to back Harwell's victory-wresting attempt, voiced their confidence in the team by loud and prolonged cheering.

"Har! Har! Har!
Har! Har! Har!
Har-well!
Har-well!
Har! Har! Har!"

This yell brought a good-natured retort from the Milford rooting section.

"That's right, Harwell!
That's right, Harwell!
The laugh's going to be on you!"

But, *was* it? Harwell, primed for the meeting with Milford, tore into the battle with such fury that Pepper was forced to call for a punt after trying Stuffy, Brick and Conway in turn. The combined efforts of these backfield men had

netted only six yards, placing the ball on Milford's thirty-one yard line, too close to her own goal to take a chance on making a first down. Dixon, the Harwell fullback, gathered in Stuffy's punt on his thirty-two yard mark and carried the ball back on a ripping run which made Harwell rooters' throats hoarse. Dixon was not stopped until he had reached mid-field. And then it was a jolting tackle by Conway which brought him down. Milford cheered the veteran right half lustily.

Encouraged by the success of her early efforts, Harwell reeled off two first downs which carried the ball to Milford's seventeen yard line almost before the home team was aware of what was happening.

"Wake up, you guys!" bellowed Captain Mellon. "Get out of your wheel chairs! This game isn't in the bag . . . not by a long shot!"

"Hold 'em!" implored the surprised Milfordites.

"I never saw such a team," said a Milford fan. "Supposed to be the strongest eleven we ever had and look how indifferent they play! Don't ever extend themselves until they have to!"

Indeed, it seemed that way. Milford braced now, with her goal actually threatened. In three downs Harwell made but a scant two yards. Then Dixon, the opposing fullback, took a position for a try at drop-kicking the bar. The ball snapped back; Milford hit the line, broke through and charged. But Dixon, instead of kicking, had run off to one side. He saw his right end dash over the Milford goal and wheel about with outstretched arms. Dixon's bullet-like pass went true. The Harwell right end fell on the ball and six hundred Harwell fans fell into each other's arms. Harwell had scored a TOUCHDOWN! A moment more and Dixon had added to the little triumph by putting over a drop-kick for the point after touchdown. A well-earned lead, this. Harwell off to a seven point advantage! And the first time that Milford's goal line had been crossed that season!

"Now, maybe it'll dawn on you birds that you've got a fight on your hands!" warned Captain Mellon, shaking a chubby finger at his team-mates. "This Harwell bunch can play ball!"

"Har! Har!" joshed Jim Hemming, but there was no humor in his voice.

The team members were all miffed because

they had been scored upon. Little concern was evidenced as to the ultimate outcome of the game. Harwell would be whipped, but—how could that touchdown be avenged?

This time it was Harwell who, receiving the kick-off, was forced to punt. Brick caught the twisting pigskin on his nineteen yard line and ran it back ten yards before going down under a fierce tackle. Harwell was playing hard, determined to hold Milford in check. A determination which Milfordites regarded as almost futile! They knew the power of their team, as sluggish as it might be in expressing itself.

"Just wait, Harwell!
JUST WAIT!"

With the ball on Milford's twenty-nine yard line Pepper called on Conway. Merle gained three yards through the left side of the line. Brick took the ball next, four yards around right end. Then, Stuffy—seven yards through center and a first down! Stuffy again . . . two yards . . . Conway . . . two yards . . . Brick . . . three yards . . . Conway . . .? Should he use Conway? Three yards needed. The ball on Milford's forty yard line. Stuffy was the surest ground-

gainer. But, no . . . Conway might think . . . Signals!

"Yea, Harwell!
Yea, Yea, Yea!"

Milford's right half was stopped on a try around end, missing another first down by inches. Whistle! The first quarter was up! As the teams changed ends of the field for the starting of the second quarter, Brick fell in alongside Pepper.

"Say, what's the idea? Conway got you buffaloed? Talk about favoritism! You're knocking us off our stride. . . . This game's really going to be tough if you don't call 'em right!"

Pepper had not the time or inclination to make answer. The teams were already lining up to resume play. Besides, Pepper felt, without Brick's having aired himself, that he had made a mistake. He should not have permitted Conway's attitude to affect him. It was his duty to select the plays which, in his best judgment, would be the most likely to advance the ball for his team. Obviously then, in exercising such judgment, it was not always possible to equally divide the work of the backfield men

with regard to the number of times each might carry the pigskin.

"Hang Conway!" Pepper decided. "If he thinks I'm not treating him square, let him go to the coach about it. Let him rave! That's no funeral of mine. I'm out here to run this team as quarterback—and I'm going to do it till I get orders not to . . .!"

CHAPTER X

THE DISSENSION GROWS

It was Harwell's ball on Milford's forty yard stripe as the game was renewed. Harwell tried two punches at the Milford line which yielded a scant three yards. Then, evidently acting on instructions from the sidelines, the Harwell quarterback called a formation which resulted in Dixon's launching of another forward passing play. And, astounding enough, Dixon's accurate arm again found an unguarded receiver for the ball. This time it was the Harwell left end. He leaped high in the air to pull down the pigskin and raced along the far side of the field with Milford tacklers in mad pursuit. So perfectly was the play executed, however, that the runner was never headed. He skipped over the Milford goal line and set the ball down behind the goal posts in great glee. A second touchdown against the much-heralded Milford! Why, Milford was soft! The eleven had been greatly over-rated. Six hundred Harwell root-

ers went insane with joy. What a team *they* had! Guess the state had better look to Harwell instead of Milford in its championship calculations! Oh, what a smashing of the dope bucket this was going to be! Especially since Reedland, the team that Milford had feared most, had beaten Harwell, 34 to 7, just the Saturday before! Harwell's cup of joy frothed over as the elated Dixon, grinning from ear to ear, plied his toe against the pigskin and sent it skimming over the bar to make the score—Harwell, 14; Milford, 0!

Dazedly, the Milford team sought to check its oozing morale. Harwell, crazed by its unexpected showing—due to Dixon's marvelous forward passing ability—was now possessed of three times its ordinary strength.

"We're waiting, Milford! We're waiting!" Harwell rooters chanted.

But, this time, Milford fans could reply only by a glum silence. What they had witnessed, thus far, had been almost unbelievable. Presenting an almost impregnable line, Milford had revealed an alarming weakness to aerial attack. Harwell, with a lighter and less experienced eleven was, by the effective use of a triple-threat player, running away with the game.

"Stop Dixon! Stop Dixon!" the Milfordites began clamoring, as the possibility of defeat was acceded.

Captain Beef Mellon held a little conference with Pepper.

"We're in the hole now *right!*" the bulky center confided, "But we've hardly had a chance to show our stuff. Talk this game up back of the line, Pep! We're going to settle Harwell's hash from here on in! We've got to! Gee, this is terrible!"

Pepper nodded, grimly. "Straight down the field from kick-off! That's us!"

"Atta spirit!" commended Beef, slapping Pepper on the back. "I'll put spines in the boys on the line. Poor Harwell! What we're not going to do to her!"

Merle Conway, directly in the path of the kick-off, took the pigskin in on the run and dodged behind a hastily formed interference. Milford team-mates, thoroughly aroused, cleared the way for their man with the ball. Stuffy and Brick bumped several eager Harwell tacklers aside and Conway reached the thirty-seven yard mark before being downed. The Milford team lined up quickly for the first play from formation.

"Signals!" yelled Pepper. "Nine . . . eleven . . . six . . . five . . .!"

And Stuffy smashed through a hole opened up by Beef Mellon for five yards. The teams had hardly lined up before Stuffy was in action again . . . three yards more! Then Brick —and a first down! Harwell took time out to stiffen its defense. Milford players, eyes gleaming—hands clawing—chafed at the delay.

In action once more, Pepper smacked the ball against Conway's groin as he came hurtling past. But Harwell, holding desperately, stopped Conway with a bare yard gain. Undaunted, Pepper called Conway's number again and the veteran crashed off left tackle for three yards. Brick made it another first down by seven yards around end. Ball now on Harwell's forty-three yard line.

"Yea, Milford! Fight 'em! Fight 'em! Fight 'em!" cheered the Milford rooters, taking heart.

Hardly had the cheers died out than Stuffy was through the Harwell line and into the open field for a charging run of twenty-two yards, aided by wonderful interference on the part of Pepper, Brick and Conway. Then Pepper took

the ball on a wide end run which was good for eight.

"Gee, just maybe that Big Three isn't *hot!*" sang out an enthused Milfordite. "*Some* comeback! Did you ever see such a fast-moving backfield? There's no stopping that combination, I tell you! No stopping it!"

On their thirteen yard line, Harwell—not so joy-crazed now—soberly dug its toes into the roughed-up earth and prepared for a last stand. It was nearing the end of the second quarter. If Harwell could only hold. . . .

"Touchdown!" begged the Milford fans.

"Over we go, gang!" shouted Pepper. "Signals. . . ."

Signals? . . . They had used straight football thus far. The way Milford was going now, this would be all that would be necessary. It scarcely mattered who was elected to carry the ball. The Milford line was opening up holes big enough to drive a horse and wagon through.

"Yea, Conway!"

The Milford right half plunged four yards. Pepper patted Conway on the back to indicate that he felt all right toward him. Conway gave no answering sign, falling back into position.

STUFFY AND BRICK PULLED PEPPER AND CONWAY APART.

Stuffy added two yards; Conway was good for two. . . .

"Hold 'em, Harwell!" screamed her six hundred rooters.

It was Milford's last down and two to go on Harwell's five yard line. For just a moment Pepper hesitated. Whom should he call on to make the yards? Obviously the backfield man who was considered the surest ground gainer. And that man was Stuffy!

"Yea, Stuffy! Yea! Yea! Yea!"

Pepper wiped nervous perspiration from his brow as he saw Stuffy propel himself through the Harwell line for the necessary yardage and one to spare. Now, with four new downs in which to cross Harwell's goal, Pepper could give Conway a chance at the honor. Peculiar . . . but, in the crisis, he had found that he was not disposed to call on Conway—veteran that Conway was. His confidence *did* repose more certainly in Stuffy and Brick. Or was this just what had been accused—naught but favoritism? Well, here was a good place to try it out! Milford two touchdowns behind! If Conway was thinking now that he would be passed up . . . he had a surprise coming.

Only two yards to go but Harwell suddenly called upon a reserve force which set Milford back on her haunches and dropped Conway for a two yard loss. Another play and Conway had barely regained the two yards he had been driven back. Conway, irritated at his failure to carry the ball over, glanced at Pepper angrily. Pepper, misinterpreting the glance, said to Conway, hotly: "All right, get sore! But don't go hollering around that I didn't give you your chance!"

Then Pepper slipped the ball to Stuffy and the fullback member of Milford's Big Three ripped through the center of Harwell's line to plant the ball over the goal for the much desired touchdown. Stuffy, however, missed the kick after touchdown, and the Milfordites groaned. The teams had no more than lined up for the next kick-off than time was called for the half. Score—Harwell, 14; Milford, 6.

A badly disgruntled bunch of players trooped off the field in the persons of the Milford team members. Harwell players were lionized by their followers. Harwell had far exceeded everyone's expectations and was enjoying the rabid encouragement usually given to underdogs. Milford had played far below form and

was enjoying the despondency usually gripping the participants in such a performance.

Coach Dolan refused to make a substitution. He seemed determined on the original eleven taking its medicine. The boys were individually raked over the coals and instructed to go back into the game and "*find* themselves."

"Stuffy, Pepper and Brick are the only ones that're alive!" snapped the coach. "They can't do it all! Get in there, you fellows, and give 'em a little real support. What's the matter, Conway—got dumb-bells tied to your feet? You're starting too slow. What do you mean, Hemming—letting yourself be sucked in on those forward passes? Harwell'd never had those two touchdowns if you boys 'ud been on your toes!"

Milford went back on the field to begin the third quarter so worked up that, as Slim Mooney would have said, "They could have scalped a bald-headed row!" Milford unleashed its full fury upon Harwell at the outset and Harwell, resisting stubbornly, soon came to realize that its cause was lost. Gaining possession of the ball after forcing Harwell to punt, Milford took the pigskin on a steady march from its eighteen yard line, never stop-

ping until the march had ended in a touchdown and Stuffy had added the extra point. The second touchdown was made by Brick.

A few minutes later Milford's march was resumed. Harwell was still leading by the narrow margin of 14 to 13 and Milford was showing no mercy. It would be difficult enough to mete out suitable revenge . . . a revenge which would explain to state papers for Milford's dismal showing in the first half. In seven minutes after the quarter had opened, Milford had a second touchdown. Stuffy again.

"See here!" protested Conway, grabbing Pepper's arm. "You're trying to make me the goat, aren't you? You're not calling on me any time when you've *got* to make your yards! That's not good . . .!"

"You bet it's good football!" blazed Pepper. "You're the only one that hasn't made his yards . . . Do you think I'm going to . . .?"

Stuffy and Brick came running in.

"What's up?"

"What's the trouble?"

"Play ball!"

"Time out!"

It was evident to all on the sidelines that some sort of a fracas had started. The spectators saw Stuffy and Brick pull Pepper and Conway apart, with Conway struggling to get at the quarterback. To put an end to the trouble, Coach Dolan sent Bert Phillpot racing out to take Conway's place. The veteran right half was not so easily removed, however. He gave a few parting words of advice to his wide-eyed substitute.

"Look out for the Big-Headed Three!" Conway warned. "They've got a nice little frame-up arranged so they can star every game!"

"You—you lie!" gasped Pepper, rushing toward Conway, enraged.

"Never mind, Pep! Never mind!" cautioned Stuffy, grabbing his chum and holding him.

Captain Beef Mellon laid hands on Conway, forcing him toward the sidelines.

"What's biting you, Con? Gone off your nut?"

"Say, you haven't played football for three years not to see it, have you? You—the captain . . .!"

"See *what?*"

"I thought so! Well, open your eyes and you'll find out what's wrong with our team this year!"

The Milford center turned the veteran right half over to Kline and Arrick who lent sympathetic ears as Captain Mellon hurried back to his team and Milford lined up for Stuffy to attempt the point after touchdown on a place-kick.

"Did you see the trimming *I* got?" Conway asked the two substitute backs. "Not a chance to carry the ball except . . .!"

On the field, Captain Mellon approached Dixon, captain of the Harwell team, as play was about to be called.

"I—I'm awfully sorry for this scene," he apologized.

"That's all right," smiled Dixon, considerately.

The incident took all zest from the game. Milford's listless brand of football was revived. Stuffy missed the try at goal by a wide margin. Harwell received the kick-off next and penetrated deep into Milford territory before Milford braced and took the ball on downs. But Milford was forced to punt as the quarter ended

after having reached mid-field. Score—Milford, 19; Harwell, 14.

Distrustful eyes followed the play of Milford's Big Three during the last quarter of the game. Every time Stuffy or Brick carried the ball, a sour-faced individual on the sidelines made fuel of their efforts to illustrate his grievance. He kept count of the number of times Stuffy and Brick were called upon as compared to Phillpot who had taken his place.

"What did I tell you?" he pointed out to Kline, Arrick and Fitzgerald. "There we are —on Harwell's seven yard line. Now who'll be elected to take it across? Anybody like to bet? . . . Either Stuffy or Brick!"

"You're wrong, Merle . . . it was Pepper!" advised Kline, as the Milford quarterback dashed around left end, straight-armed two tacklers and fell over Harwell's goal.

Conway swallowed.

"Well, it wasn't Phillpot, anyway!" retorted the veteran right half, defensively. "I should have known. It was Pepper's turn to break in the scoring. Keeps the Big Three looking sweet to the coach!"

Arrick gave Conway a questioning glance.

"Look here, Con—you're not just a little bit *green* . . .?"

The look that Conway gave Arrick in return was enough to make the substitute left half ashamed for having harbored the thought.

"Stuffy hasn't done so well on points after touchdown to-day," remarked Kline. "He's just missed another one. That puts the score at twenty-five to fourteen."

"Kline—you're *it!*" called the coach.

Kline tossed aside his blanket, winked at his fellow substitutes, and hurried out on the field to tap Stuffy on the shoulder and report to the referee. Stuffy took his removal graciously, trotting off the field to a tremendous ovation being accorded him by Milford and Harwell alike.

"Stuffy, bah!" jeered Conway. "Kline could do what he's done if he had the same opportunity. I could myself. Anybody could!"

The remainder of the game was a series of substitutions, Coach Dolan practically replacing the entire line. In the backfield, Pepper was permitted to remain, the Milford quarterback coming in for more criticism from the veteran right half because Brick appeared to be given

the ball at all times when a substantial gain would have been of unusual credit.

"See that?" blazed Conway. "Kline and Phillpot are being used to set the stage for Brick, now that Stuffy is out. They're getting the call on downs one and two while Brick gets the chance on the third or fourth to make it a first down!"

With five minutes of the last quarter left, Arrick was sent in for Brick and Conway's caustic comments were brought to an end. The game closed with Milford winning by the score of 25 to 14. A decidedly dejected six hundred from Harwell left the field, taking what consolation they could in a recollection of the first half when their team had so distinctly outplayed the eleven which had been rated best in the state. But, if Harwell was dejected in defeat, Milford was dejected in victory. There was nothing to gloat about in such a triumph and the Milford locker room was, consequently, a place of gloom. Players dressed quietly and alone and slipped out into the gathering dusk. Outside, however, certain figures lingered, being joined by others until two small groups were formed. The first group, on closer scrutiny,

would have been found to comprise Milford's backfield substitutes—and Merle Conway. This group, once the veteran right half had arrived, moved off slowly toward the downtown part of Milford, talking heatedly.

Hardly had the first group been swallowed up in the descending darkness, than a familiar group emerged from the shadows and stood, debating.

"Boy, they sure are sore!" ejaculated Pepper.

"And it's all due to that big stiff, Conway!" burst out Stuffy. "I'd like to take that guy across my knee and give him a good spanking!"

"Called us the 'Big-Headed Three'!" fumed Brick. "Trying to get us in bad with the rest of the team! Still feel sorry for him, Pep?"

"Sorry!" snorted Pepper. "So sorry that I wish I'd never apologized. He thought I was confessing. What's that saying about 'might as well have the game as the name'?"

"Search me," replied Stuffy, "I never was any good at quotations—but you've remembered enough of it to fill the bill. We've got

the name all right and it's up to us to stand together through this!"

"Let 'em jump on us for hogging the play!" challenged Brick. "You notice Coach Dolan isn't kicking, don't you? That ought to show who's to blame . . ."

Pepper shook his head, slowly.

"Y-e-s," he said, "but I've somehow got the feeling that he's watching us awfully close. I —I've tried to be square . . . but it's lots harder than you think . . . that is, if you figure the way Conway does. Say, pals—I can't be raked for calling on you in the pinches when I know you're most likely to make the yards, can I?"

Stuffy and Brick looked at one another, considering. This was an unusual question. It called for an unprejudiced answer . . . and yet it was of a nature which might have been termed embarrassing. Stuffy cleared his throat. Brick followed suit.

"Why . . . a . . . *no,* I should say *not!*" they exclaimed, almost together.

In downtown Milford, a group of Milford team members picked up a copy of the afternoon *Eagle,* glancing at the sporting headline.

PLAY OF MILFORD
UNCERTAIN, ERRATIC

Consistent Work of Big Three in Backfield
Only Redeeming Feature of Milford's
Listless Victory over Harwell

"The Big Three again!" raved the veteran right half. "Always the *Big Three!* Well, we'll settle their hash and settle it quick!"

CHAPTER XI

SOMETHING IN THE AIR

The next week in Milford was the week of the county fair. It was a week in which town folks bumped shoulders with country folks and everybody had a good time getting covered with confetti and stuck up with sticks of taffy. Advance reports had it that the midway this year was a good two blocks long and that exhibits at the fair had doubled those of any other exposition. Fair Week was always celebrated by half-holidays in the schools throughout the county and a shut-down of all business activities from three o'clock on in the afternoons.

On the Saturday evening following Milford High's victory over Harwell, Stuffy, Pepper and Brick met by appointment at the Martinique Hotel where Edwin Kirby of Baldwin was stopping. The three chums were still disturbed in their minds over the ill-feeling which had arisen against them among fellow team-mates,

and they listened to Mr. Kirby's recital of the part they were to play in the conduct of his booth with half-hearted interest.

"What's the matter, boys?" Mr. Kirby asked, finally. "Don't my plans sound good to you? If there's anything that doesn't strike you favorably I wish you'd . . ."

"No, no . . . everything sounds great!" Stuffy assured. "Honest it does!"

"Well, then—what *is* the trouble?" persisted the man who was just now pursuing his hobby as chicken fancier. "Something go wrong at the game to-day?"

The chums glanced at one another, reluctantly. Should they or should they not—let Mr. Kirby in on what had happened . . . what *was* happening?

"Why . . . a . . . we . . . a . . ." started Brick, stopping in confusion.

"Some of the boys on the team seem to think we're trying to be the whole show," informed Pepper.

"Oh,—I see," said Mr. Kirby, after a slight pause, quite obviously waiting for a fuller explanation.

Pepper nodded, face flushing. Might as well admit it. Chances are the story would be all

over town anyway. And Mr. Kirby had better get the facts at first hand. Pepper had hoped that spectators would not place undue emphasis upon the words he had exchanged with the veteran right half on the playing field. The words had been spoken in the heat of conflict. Fellows weren't so accountable for what they said then. At least it didn't seem as though they should be. At any rate, Conway had been the one who had done the rushing. If it hadn't been for Stuffy and Brick pulling him off, Conway might have forced a disgraceful clash. No, the fault was Conway's all right. And this much must be made clear to Mr. Kirby. Otherwise, he might figure the Big Three to blame and such figuring might gum up their chance to have a great time at the fair!

"It's Conway's fault!" charged Pepper. "He's been at the bottom of the whole thing. He started out accusing me of favoring Stuffy and Brick . . . and in the game this afternoon he said I was trying to make him the goat . . .!"

"Hmmm!" breathed Mr. Kirby, interestedly.

"The truth of the matter was, we needed to make our yards and Conway wasn't coming

through!" explained Brick, "Pep did call on him as much as he dared . . . but when we had to . . . er . . . a . . .!" Milford's left half stopped in sudden embarrassment as he realized what he was leading up to.

"Hmmm!" furnished the chicken fancier. "I understand perfectly—*perfectly!* . . . I don't know much about football from the player's standpoint, but I saw that game today and it was clearly obvious—from the spectator's viewpoint—that, if it hadn't been for the work of you boys out there, we'd have been whipped!"

"It's darn nice of you to say that," returned Pepper, appreciatively. "The write-ups in the newspaper seemed to think the same thing. Not that we're trying to take any unusual credit, but looking at the thing impersonally. . . ."

"Of course!" reassured Mr. Kirby, patting the Milford quarterback on the shoulder. "Don't let that fellow Conway worry you. You boys go right ahead and play the game, fair and square. He'll only hurt himself. Now, is everything clear about what you're to do next week?"

Apparently everything was. The boys arose to go, somewhat relieved. If a man like Mr. Kirby sympathized with their side of the matter, wasn't it reasonable to suppose that other unprejudiced Milfordites would, too? Indeed, if this were the reaction which might be expected from those becoming acquainted with the squabble, the Big Three certainly had nothing to fear on the score of public opinion. It was quite likely that there were many folks in Milford to-night, discussing the personal incident in the game. And, if members of the Big Three had conducted themselves as well as each hoped, the chances were that they would emerge more popular than ever. The whole affair, in fact, seemed to hinge upon "ifs." That was the one unpleasant thing about it. But, IF—Oh, what was the use? They'd just have to wait and see.

"Say, gang—have you heard the latest?" It was Merle Conway talking and, by the way he had burst into the locker room, it was evident that "the latest" was something he regarded of great interest. "Perhaps you're wondering why the Big Three haven't shown up to dress. Climb into your togs, quick, and hoof it out to

the fair grounds with me. We'll just have time before practice!"

"What *is* it?"

"Aw, don't make us hurry! Tell us!"

"What's the gag?"

"No gag! Wait till you see 'em! I just came from the fair grounds . . . had to help Dad take some merchandise up for his booth. It'll knock you for a row!"

"What—your Dad's booth?"

"Naw . . . the Big Three! The *brass* of 'em! Who do you think they are, anyway?"

The historic Paul Revere had no greater success in arousing his fellow countrymen than Merle Conway had that somber Monday afternoon in the locker room of Milford High when he spread the news to his team-mates about the Big Three. In less than three minutes the gridiron gladiators were dressed ready for battle and dashing out down the street toward the fair grounds and Brinkley field. None of the players rode horseback but some of them did credit to the speed of man's four-footed friend in the time that they took to reach the entrance gates of the County Fair. The ticket seller, recognizing the football squad, waved the players inside without charging admittance.

And, led by the redoubtable Conway, the team members moved en masse upon the unsuspecting members of the Big Three who, from their entrenchment in the poultry building, were about to complete their first afternoon of service under the generalship of one Edwin Kirby, Milford's distinguished chicken fancier. At sight of the booth, the advancing squad halted as though stopped by a bombshell.

Directly in front of the players stood the open framework of a chicken house, the framework wound with the school colors of Milford High. A long counter ran across the face of the building, leaving just enough space at right and left to permit of an "entrance" and "exit" for all who cared to venture within. Behind this counter was a little table upon which was a pile of circulars. And behind the table, centered upon a raised platform, was the feature of the exhibit—a miniature football field—all sodded and marked out in white lime with goal posts and bleachers . . . and, prize poultry representing the teams! Of course the poultry was unaware of the rôle it was so obviously designed to play and the illusion only carried so far, but the exhibit was unique enough to call forth admiring exclama-

tions. Quite above and beyond the poultry, however, was the presence in the attractive little poultry house of three exceedingly popular Milford youths. Who in the crowd that passed before the booth, except for such as might be entertaining a grievance, could resist the opportunity thus offered to step up and grip members of the Big Three by the hand and to receive, in return, a small booklet telling all about Edwin Kirby's wonderful fowls? A large canvas streamer, stretched across the front of the highly decorated chicken house, just beneath the roof, cordially invited one and all to get acquainted with several kinds of Big Threes. The wording on the streamer was of such a nature that, when the members of the football squad read it, they almost—to use an appropriate figure of speech—went up in smoke. Here is the printing their eyes gulped in:

The Big Three in the Poultry Field!

SEE PRIZE BLUE RIBBON POULTRY

STUFFY . Three Blue
PEPPER . Ribbon Fowls of
BRICK . Extraordinary Merit

A Poultry Combination of Class

A TOUCHDOWN IN THE POULTRY FIELD

Talk With The Boys—They'll Tell You About Their Namesakes!

"Have they the *big head?*" asked the veteran right half as fellow team-mates stood staring. "Well—*have* they!"

Stuffy, Pepper, and Brick turning, beheld their football comrades.

"Hello, bunch!" called Brick, warmly. "How long you been here? Come right in!"

"Time we were getting to the field!" snapped Captain Beef Mellon, eyes flashing. He placed a restraining hand on several of the more curious squad members who started to push forward. Milford citizens commenced to crowd around.

"Wait a couple of minutes and we'll be with you!" cried Stuffy. "Our togs are in the back of the booth . . ."

Edwin Kirby, face beaming, suddenly appeared from the rear of his uniquely fashioned chicken house.

"Well, well . . . if it isn't the rest of the team!" he exclaimed, heartily. "Step up, boys, and make yourselves at home. I want

you to consider this place your headquarters during the Fair."

But the squad of Milford High players did an about face as an answer to the chicken fancier's proffer of hospitality and departed to a chorus of "Boohs!"

"*Now* what have we done?" asked Pepper, amazed.

Stuffy and Brick looked after their fellow team-mates glumly. Mr. Kirby shook his head in perplexity. Milford townsfolk, who had witnessed the show of friction, gathered in little groups to speculate with one another on what it all meant. The Big Three felt themselves the cynosure of all eyes. Some of the onlookers snickered.

"Some roosters those guys are!" said one.

Unable to stand the scrutiny longer and not willing to be subjected to questioning, the three chums hastened into the little partitioned-off room of the booth where they made a quick change into their football suits. While they dressed they talked over the latest surprising development.

"This beats me!" said Stuffy, crestfallen. "What do you suppose they're up to? Funny,

their coming here on the way to the field, anyhow!"

"It's Conway again!" raved Brick. "He just can't let us alone! He evidently sees something wrong in our being here in the booth . . .!"

"Yeah, and whatever it is, he's got the whole team with him this time," added Pepper. "Did you pipe how Cap Mellon acted? He glowered daggers at us . . . ordered the boys to steer clear . . . Gee, isn't this a heck of a mess?"

"Do you know what I think?" contributed Mr. Kirby, sympathetically, "I don't like to say this but I think the whole trouble's been caused because the fellows are pie-eyed with jealousy! Absolutely pie-eyed!"

The three chums, in different stages of dressing, paused to give one another consulting glances. The reason that Mr. Kirby had suggested was one that each had been secretly turning over in his mind and had considered too delicate, from a personal standpoint, to express. But now that the chicken fancier had given voice to it, there surely could be no harm in seconding his analysis of the situation.

"It's too bad," lamented Pepper, sincerely. "If I'd known they were going to take our doings this way, I'd never gone in for this."

"What business is it of theirs?" flared Brick, jerking so vigorously at a shoe-string that it snapped in two. "Would we have kicked if Mr. Kirby had chosen any of them instead of us . . .?"

"We—we might," answered Pepper. "I'm just wondering . . ."

"They've been jealous of us all season," declared Stuffy, indignantly. "It wouldn't have made any difference whether we took up with this or not. They were just about ready to turn against us and they jumped at the first opportunity. Well, whatever they do, they're not going to freeze me. I'm going to go on just as though nothing had happened!"

"I'm sorry, boys," offered Mr. Kirby, earnestly, "I didn't have any idea that this booth of mine would cause a ruction. Is there anything I can do to help straighten things out?"

"No, thanks," said Pepper, forcing a smile. "It's one of those affairs that'll just have to work itself out. Don't you feel bad about us.

We know your intentions were okay and we're going to stick!"

"You bet we are!" promised Stuffy and Brick.

The members of the Big Three were on time for football practice that night but they found a reception awaiting them which was only a few degrees south of frigid. Even Coach Dolan acted exceedingly cool. The day itself had been none too encouraging on the side of temperature and these conditions combined served to make the experience of the three chums most chilling. For once, individual components of the much-heralded Big Three performed miserably in the backfield. Fumbles were frequent in scrimmage; Stuffy's kicks were lacking in power and accuracy; Pepper had no dash in the quarterback position; Brick's carrying of the ball was listless. But Conway, grinning savagely, was a veritable tiger on the offense! He made use of his every opportunity to go tearing through the reserve line or around the ends. And it was Pepper who imagined that the reserves were actually helping Conway get away for good gains by not making strenuous efforts to down him! It wasn't the usual night for scrimmage anyway.

What was the matter? Was the coach wise to everything? And was he deliberately giving the boys a chance to get some of the ill feeling out of their systems by driving them at each other? No one would ever know. But one thing was certain. The strained situation which had been precipitated, thanks to Conway, between the Big Three and the rest of the team, was getting no better fast!

At the close of the practice session, Coach Dolan caused a mild sensation by calling Stuffy, Pepper and Brick aside. As the Big Three approached the coach they were conscious of many knowing glances and remarks.

"Now they're going to get it!"

"Boy, what they've got coming to them!"

"The Three High Horsemen—that's what they are!"

But all that Coach Dolan said to the much worried youths was: "Don't let me catch you dressing any place else but the locker room again!"

"We—we didn't think it mattered where we dressed, just so we reported for practice on time," explained Pepper, surprised.

"Well, you know now, don't you?" snapped the coach, "Turn in!"

It was Friday evening at the Fair Grounds, of the most tempestuous week in Milford High athletic history, that the now famous booth of Edwin Kirby, chicken fancier, was visited by a much interested middle-aged gentleman who wanted, above all else, to have a good chat with the members of the Big Three.

"This is the most original display I have ever seen at a Fair," congratulated the stranger, "and I've made it a hobby of seeing fairs in all parts of the state for the past sixteen years. You see I'm on the committee of the State Fair Association. I'm greatly interested in athletics, too. That's why I'd like to speak to the boys. I've heard lots about them since I've been in Milford."

"They *are* in the limelight a lot," admitted Mr. Kirby, only too mindful of certain stories which the papers had printed during the week, mostly pertaining to the injudicious manner in which the Big Three had permitted themselves to be exploited; "I'm sure the boys would be glad to meet you. What's your name, please?"

"Farrar," answered the stranger. "George Farrar."

The chicken fancier called Stuffy, Pepper and Brick over and introduced them. Then, his

attention demanded elsewhere, he left the boys with the pleasant-mannered gentleman.

"I suppose you young fellows are about worn out seeing people," surmised the stranger, a glance taking in their tired expressions. "It's not as soft having charge of a fair booth as it's cracked up to be, is it?"

"You said it!' agreed the Big Three, almost together.

"After about the first day it's usually real work," sympathized Mr. Farrar. "I know. I've run plenty of 'em. But I've never seen any like this one. I was just telling Mr. Kirby that he'd certainly worked out a clever idea. If this booth was at the state it would cop first prize in the poultry division, hands down. Good boost for the town, too . . . with the high school football team played up."

"Some folks don't seem to think so," said Stuffy, dryly.

"It's caused a lot of trouble," informed Pepper, ruefully.

"Been a great attraction though, for that very reason!" supplied Brick, with an attempt at humor.

"I believe I've heard something about that," replied Mr. Farrar, understandingly. "It seems

that you boys came by your title of 'Big Three' through your performances on the football field and that there's been some objection over the use of this title to er . . . advertise chickens. Isn't that it?"

"Well,—partly," acknowledged Pepper. "Folks haven't objected to the idea of the football field and the use of the high school colors . . . but they've raised quite a rumpus over our having any connection."

"Small town stuff, most likely," diagnosed Mr. Farrar; "I see you haven't let their attitude disturb you."

"Not enough to make us quit," answered Stuffy, "but it's spoiled our week for us. Why, we even had folks try to scare us by saying that doing this would affect our amateur standing!"

"You did?" inquired the stranger, interested. "How ridiculous! Mr. Kirby isn't making any sales from this booth, is he?"

"No, sir."

"He isn't going to use your names as tradenames after the fair is over, is he?"

"Why,—why . . . I guess not. We hadn't asked him."

"I presume he's paying you a little some-

thing for your time, though?" inquired Mr. Farrar.

"Oh, yes, he . . ." started Brick, but choked the rest of the reply as Pepper squeezed his arm.

"Well, I hope everything works out all right for you," smiled the pleasant-mannered gentleman. "I must be getting on. Didn't think it was so late. Mighty glad to have met you!"

"Same here!" answered Stuffy, with Pepper and Brick echoing his reply, weakly.

Mr. Farrar had hardly been lost in the crowd than Brick turned hotly upon Pepper.

"What was the grand idea—pinching my arm? He saw you do it and he took it as his cue to leave right away. Made me feel like a fool!"

"You should have felt like a fool!" retorted Pepper. "Pals, this hunch may sound crazy but I'm positive that man was after information! He was too all-fired nosey. And the proof of the pudding is the way he lit out as soon as he saw I was wise!"

"By Jingo!" exclaimed Stuffy, thoughtfully. "But what could a man like that want with information about us?"

"That's just it!" emphasized Pepper. "Who

is he? Where does he come from? Do we know? And yet we were letting our tongues run away with themselves!"

"Say, that's right. We've got to be more careful!" decided Brick.

"Especially when the game with Reedland's less than two weeks away!" reminded Pepper, "Gee, I don't know—maybe it's just me—but I'm getting suspicious of about everybody. So many things have happened to us lately . . . and I can't help feeling that they're not through happening yet!"

CHAPTER XII

THE CRASH COMES

Saturday, the last day of the County Fair, brought also the last football encounter before the clash with Reedland. It was an out of town game, too, and one that gave every promise of furnishing Milford with a strenuous workout. The opponent was none other than Orville Academy and it took no long memories to recall that Milford had a stinging defeat to avenge . . . a defeat which Orville had administered last season through solving Milford's plays by Pepper's tell-tale weakness, the shifting of his head to glimpse the player who was going to carry the ball.

Coach Dolan and a squad of twenty-two hopeful, left the square at Milford at twelve o'clock noon on the hour and a half bus ride to Orville. A large crowd of Milfordites was on hand to see the team off and a goodly number followed in automobiles. But, somehow, the old enthusiasm did not seem to exist in either fans or

team members. The past week had been so filled with accusations, rumors, exotic play and indifferent attitudes that the uncertain atmosphere had reached out into the town itself. And the team which Milford had so proudly claimed as the most powerful ever to represent its high school, was now regarded as a distinctly dubious quantity.

"The boys aren't playing together for some reason," voiced an observant Milfordite. "They seem to have lost the old fighting spirit. There's been too much quibbling and fault-finding. Why, there's hardly a night of practice this week that there hasn't been an outburst from someone on the playing field. Can't imagine what Coach Dolan is thinking of to let the boys carry on this way. As near as I can make out, most all the trouble's centered around the Big Three. Of course I don't pretend to know who's to blame but whoever it is, they ought to get sat on good and plenty!"

And this is just what happened. The ones to blame *did* get "sat on good and plenty," also the ones not to blame. But the "sitter on" was not Coach Dolan, it was Orville—to the tune of 20 to 13! Hardly a score which might be said to have avenged Milford for last season's defeat. Rather a rubbing of Milford's proud nose

deeper in the mire of despair and discord. Orville certainly had the Indian sign on her sturdy foeman. This made the second successive year that the Academy had trounced an eleven supposed to be its superior in every department. Too bad that Orville did not hold the same Indian sign over Reedland. Just last week Reedland had bowled the Academy over by a 31 to 7 score. Lucky Milford! She still had a chance to redeem herself by rallying to defeat Reedland, only conqueror of Orville. Such a victory, even despite the loss to Orville, would give Milford a clear title to the championship. Of course, Orville could always claim that she had beaten the team which had beaten the team which had beaten her . . . if such a complicated claim made sense. But where did such a claim get one?

The Monday afternoon's *Milford Eagle* carried a scorching write-up of the game, several paragraphs of which perhaps best summarized the reasons for the home team's dismal showing.

THE INEVITABLE HAPPENS

Playing true to the form which had been exhibited in practice the past week, Milford

High went down before a vastly inferior team in Orville Academy last Saturday, by the score of 20 to 13. In terming Orville "vastly inferior" no intention is meant of taking away any credit from Milford's conquerors. But, in all the history of Milford's athletic teams, there has never been a game more needlessly lost than this one was.

Team Torn by Dissension

Contesting with an apparent utter disregard for anyone but their individual selves, the Milford team appeared, not as the powerful close-working unit of earlier games, but as eleven separate units—each striving for a modicum of questionable glory.

The wonder is not that Milford lost, but that the score in defeat was at all respectable. An opponent of Reedland's strength would have trampled the Milford of last Saturday underfoot by a six touchdown margin.

Big Three Worst Offenders

Most grievous of all to report, however, is the complete collapse of Milford's highly touted Big Three. This backfield combination, of whom great things had rightfully been expected, turned in a pitiful performance, though—in justice to the

trio—it must be admitted that interference seemed sadly lacking whenever they elected to carry the ball.

Veteran Conway Flashes

Perhaps the only creditable showing out of a maze of ineffective efforts, was the playing of the veteran Merle Conway at right half. Conway awakened from the lethargy he has been in all season and proved the only consistent ground gainer, going over for both Milford touchdowns. . . .

"Milford can't say that we tried to hog the play *that* game!" said Pepper to his chums, when he had finished reading the account. "And Conway ought to be sufficiently satisfied with the puff he got to lay off us for a few days!"

"Huh!" snorted Brick. "That'll just whet his appetite! He's got the team with him now and he'll point to what he did as a sample of what he could have done if he'd had the chance all year. Don't you think it's about time we were going to Coach Dolan and . . .?"

"Nothing stirring!" cried Stuffy. "We've tried our darndest to do the right thing. We don't have to do any kicking or explaining.

It's plain enough to everybody what the trouble is now . . . and if Coach Dolan's going to let their jealousy of us ruin the best football team he ever had . . . *all right!*"

The three chums were standing in the corridor of the school. It was time that they were going to the locker room to dress for practice, though none of them felt in the mood for so doing. As they stood, heatedly discussing the situation, Slim Mooney approached them on the run.

"So here you are!" he called, by way of greeting. The school wit's face was sober and he was panting for breath. "I've been looking all over for you. Principal Pomeroy wants to see you! Gee whizz, guys—do you know what's happened? *You've been debarred from athletics!*"

For a long, quivering moment, all that Stuffy, Pepper and Brick could do was to stare at Mooney, unbelieving. What was this—another of his jokes? No, he couldn't be kidding. Nobody would dare kid over anything as serious as all that. Debarred from athletics? What for?

"You—you don't mean it!" gasped Pepper,

finally. "Is it . . . have we been put out because of the . . . the feeling on the team?"

"No, no!" said Mooney, scornfully. "Not that! You're debarred by the State High School Foot Ball Association on a protest filed by a bird named Farrar from Reedland . . . !"

"Farrar!" cried the Big Three, significantly.

"Know him?" asked the school wit, surprised.

"Met him," advised Pepper, "at the Fair!"

"Well, it looks like he's got you cooked," informed Mooney, seeming to enjoy the relation of details. "Gee, isn't it a crime? You're charged with 'capitalization of athletic fame,' whatever that is . . . engaging for pay in an occupation wherein your value depended on the reputation you'd made in sport. It's all come out of your doings for Mr. Kirby!"

"Where's Principal Pomeroy now?" asked Stuffy, determinedly.

"In his office!"

"We didn't take any pay!" protested Pepper. "Mr. Kirby was going to pay us but it didn't seem right, after we'd thought it over . . . so we wouldn't let him give us a cent.

The State Association can't debar us for that!"

"Yes, but how are we going to prove that we didn't get paid?" moaned Brick. "Especially since I was dumb-bell enough to tell that sneak Farrar that Mr. Kirby *was* giving us something?"

"There's going to be a hot time over this all right," assured Mooney. "Wait till the news gets out over town and they find out that it was a Reedland man who got you fellows disbarred. It's a clear attempt to fix it so Reedland can whip us this year. Some sportsmanship, eh?"

It is characteristic of a quarreling man and wife that, when neighbors seek to interfere, they forget their quarrel and turn against the neighbors. When the town of Milford heard the crushing news of what had befallen the idolized Big Three, it immediately forgot the internal strife which had existed, and rallied to the Big Three's defense. Much indignation was expressed over the fact that action had been instigated by a Reedland citizen. This, on the face of things, made the boys' case appear a good one. Had the protest come from any individual in any other town but Reedland, more emphasis might have been placed

on the charges which had resulted in the disbarment. Principal Pomeroy related how he had been secretly called before the Athletic Board of Control and questioned concerning the status of affairs. He was compelled to admit that the Big Three had permitted the use of their names and had worked in the booth devised by Mr. Kirby. And the board, on this admission, had considered the evidence strong enough to take immediate action. The game that Milford had played against Orville was ordered canceled, though the irony of that was that Milford had already lost it.

Mr. Kirby, perhaps the most aggrieved of any, prepared a petition in which he set forth that the boys had been innocent participants in the idea and that they had refused to accept any money for their services and that his booth had been devised as much to advertise Milford High and its football team as it had to introduce his prize poultry. It was his contention that, because of the circumstances surrounding this case, unusual consideration should be shown members of the Big Three. And it was hoped that a special meeting of the Athletic Board could be called with regard to "the reinstatement to eligibility to compete as an

amateur," upon it being shown to the satisfaction of the board, that "such person or persons had ceased to commit any of the acts, or to engage in any of the pursuits or practices set down in said clause and (2) that said person or persons intend never again to commit any of the said acts, or to engage in any of the said pursuits or practices." A rather confusing statement of facts . . . but a vitally important method of procedure for all concerned. And Milford, excessively hot under the collar, signed the petition to the last inhabitant!

"Guess that'll cure the Big Three Roosters of cockiness!" laughed Conway when he heard of the calamity. But his pun failed to arouse like utterances against the trio. Team-mates were thoroughly sobered by the happening. And each player, with the possible exception of the veteran right half, began to search his own soul, to see what he might find there.

Thursday, two days before the season's biggest game, found the Athletic Board of Control unmoved. Mr. Kirby had made a trip to the State Capitol City to visit the secretary and chairman of the board and present the petition on behalf of the Big Three but, in the

opinion of these two authorities, no basis for a reconsideration of the board's action was contained in the new evidence. The petition was regarded as a splendid tribute on the part of Milford to its deposed athletic idols . . . a tribute which made their violation of the amateur rules all the more regrettable.

When Stuffy, Pepper and Brick, anxiously awaiting news that they would be given a chance to plead their case, learned that the board had refused such opportunity, they gave vent to their pent-up feelings in heartbroken fashion.

"It's our own fault," wailed Pepper. "We brought it on ourselves. It's what I warned you buddies to be looking out for at the first of the season!"

"What's that?" asked Brick, bluntly.

"The big head!" gulped Pepper. "The BIG head! Oh, yes . . . we've got it! And instead of breaking the news to each other, we just kidded each other along . . . patted each other on the back . . . told ourselves how good we were . . . and accused everybody else of having the big head but us!"

"Get out!" protested Stuffy. "Just because we knew how good we were is no sign . . .!"

"No, I suppose not!" charged Pepper. "I suppose the reason we accepted Mr. Kirby's offer wasn't because we liked the thought of being where everybody could see us—US—the famous athletic combination of Milford High . . . the BIG Three . . .! We were flattered to the eyebrows at being picked . . . at having our names used . . . and, oh—the nice modesty that we tried to affect! And the self-justification that we exercised! I did call on you fellows more than I needed to . . . I'll admit that now . . . but that much really wasn't intentional . . . it was just habit. Don't think I'm trying to let Conway out. He's got the big head, too. It's been a case of big heads against big heads! We couldn't stand having the town praise us up. We had to let it get under our hatbands . . . and the result is, we'll never have a chance to compete as amateurs again. Never! Not even in college!"

The three chums sat, eyes moist, a much chagrined and repentant trio. They felt the helplessness of their position and the shame at having, by their conduct, robbed the team of much needed services against a Reedland thirsting for the blood of victory.

"Well, the substitute backfield of big heads will get their chance to show how good they really are!" said Stuffy, with a touch of sarcasm. "I'm wishing them luck!"

"No hard feelings." pleaded Pepper. "That won't get us anywhere!"

CHAPTER XIII

A VETERAN TRIES TO ATONE

At Brinkley field, Coach Dolan broke his long silence on matters of which shrewd eyes and a keen understanding of youths had made him aware. He knew that every member of the football squad would be in the frame of mind to accept what he might say now. Every word would be a sharp-pointed dagger . . . every sentence a stab.

"You've brought it all on yourself!" censured the coach, taking a page out of Pepper's book on the same subject. "You forgot you were a football eleven and you each tried to play the game for yourself alone. In this, the backfield offended much more than the line. And now that you've sown the seeds of jealousy and conceit . . . you're due to reap the harvest those seeds always bring . . . You didn't seem to take any pride in the fact that, collectively you were the best football eleven I had ever assembled. The sort of pride

you wanted to satisfy was an individual pride . . . and three of your number have satisfied their pride at the expense of everything that they no doubt hold dear. The rest of you are no less to blame, but much more fortunate as to circumstances. However, there's no use crying over spilled milk. What's done is done. And the big game is the day after to-morrow. What are you going to do about that? What *can* you do? Personally, I look for a Reedland victory. You can't remove the backbone of a team's backfield this late in the season and expect much else in meeting such competition as you'll have to stack up against Saturday. But I hope you young men will realize, as you're playing that game, that you've been just as responsible for the loss of the Big Three to the team as they have been themselves. And if this realization causes you to play hard enough . . . to bury all thoughts of self for the sake of teamwork . . . to fight Reedland to a standstill . . . then, maybe some good will have come out of all this disgraceful hodgepodge after all! Think it over and decide what you are going to do!"

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick were at the public library that night, catching up on some

reference work, when they were surprised to see the figure of Merle Conway approaching. Instinctively the demeanor of the Big Three stiffened. The veteran right half pushed aside a placard which read, "Silence, please," and whispered hoarsely: "Come on outside, will you? I want to talk to you fellows a minute!"

Wonderingly, the three chums tip-toed out after Conway, confronting him on the library steps.

"Listen," said Conway, his voice trembling. "There must be some way for you guys to get reinstated. There's got to be! We can't do without you in that line-up!"

Stuffy laughed, bitterly.

"Be yourself, Con! Be yourself! You don't mean that!"

"Yes, I do! Honest! Oh, I've been to blame, too. I've had a chip on my shoulder all year. I'll tell you fellows something. I've been sore ever since they elected Mellon captain. You see . . . I . . . well, I figured the honor ought to have been coming to me. And then . . . and then, to get even, I wanted to steal the limelight . . . to be the big gun in the backfield . . . and when

I found I couldn't be that . . . I . . . well, you know the rest!"

"It's pretty late now for you to be telling us that," said Brick, a bit coldly.

The veteran right half swallowed shamefacedly.

"I guess it doesn't do much good," he confessed, "but I feel better having told you, anyway. Besides, I was thinking . . . if someone could just get to that Mr. Farrar who filed the protest . . . and get him to withdraw it . . . and to use his influence to have you fellows put right . . . there might still be a chance . . ."

"Not a chance in the world!" broke in Pepper. "Farrar's a Reedland man. I'm not insinuating that all Reedland's like that but Farrar's a bad one. And even if you could get Farrar lined up . . . you never could get a meeting of the board of control in time to do us any good on the Reedland game. That board's made up of five members and those members are scattered all over the state. No, —we're sunk!"

Conway stood, clenching and unclenching his hands.

"It doesn't do me any good to say that I'm

sorry either," he murmured, in a husky voice. "But somehow . . . I—I just can't play in that game unless you fellows are going to play, too!"

The veteran right half wheeled suddenly, as though struggling to control his emotions, and strode hastily away. Affected, the members of the Big Three watched him out of sight.

A light signal practice was all that Coach Dolan had slated for his team on Friday but the school was due for another shock when word was noised around that Merle Conway, most dependable backfield man left, had not put in an appearance and had not been found in town! The Conways, father and mother, were worried, reporting that their son had taken the car early that day and not returned. His whereabouts were a complete mystery. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick, feeling that the veteran right half had taken their debarment too much to heart, told of his brief interview with them . . . and of how concerned he had apparently felt over the fact that there was no possibility of their playing against Reedland. The Milford police department was asked to assist in locating the youth.

But Saturday came—and no Conway. Sat-

urday, however, brought Reedland to add to Milford's excitement and suspense. Reedland, two thousand strong, with a band and banners! Unfortunately, because of the events which had happened in Milford, the home folks did not feel so disposed to treat their rival visitors with the usual cordiality. The day was cold with a bleak sky . . . . a grim sort of day which somehow crept into the marrow of Milford High players, nervously awaiting the opening whistle.

To Stuffy, Pepper and Brick the tenseness of the day was a bit relieved. There was no agony of anticipation as game-time drew near for they occupied the comparative quiet of the bleachers in place of the throbbing atmosphere of the locker room. How strangely different it seemed to be in the stands, gazing out upon the team that had so shortly claimed them as members! A burning sense of remorse came over the three chums. What a price they were paying . . . and were doomed to pay . . . as a result of their past conduct! A humble, penitent little group of three they were now! Now, when it was too late!

"Con's not out there," said Stuffy, after

scrutinizing every Milford player on the field. "He hasn't shown up yet!"

"Isn't that queer?" exclaimed Pepper, conscious of a tingling sensation in the temples. "You—you don't suppose he could have . . . have gone 'nuts' over this thing, do you?"

"Can't ever tell," speculated Brick, soberly. "He was acting mighty funny when he hunted us up the other night. Remember the last thing he said as he was leaving us—that he just couldn't play to-day unless we were going to play, too?"

"The bird's cuckoo!" pronounced Stuffy, not realizing how humorous his remark may have sounded. "Plumb cuckoo!"

Going into the game against Reedland, greatly weakened by the loss of her entire first team backfield, Milford High early gave evidence that it was an eleven sadly shorn of power. Milford might have rallied from its first great blow, the debarment of the Big Three, but the unaccountable disappearance of its veteran right half had proved the last straw. The team's morale was shattered. It took the field prepared to accept a beating

. . . to accept that beating as gracefully as possible for the sake of the home folks. Fighting spirit? How could a team have fighting spirit that had encountered such demoralizing setbacks as Milford had been called upon to face? How could a team, with half its players suffering guilty consciences, concentrate upon the winning of the season's biggest game? It couldn't, that was the answer. And Reedland, sensing Milford's state of listless dejection, tore into the fray with added fury. There'd be no sympathy shown this game. Not with all that Reedland had to avenge. The visitors were thoroughly mindful of how Milford, last year, had deprived them of a second state championship in the closing seconds of play. It had been the Big Three who had beaten Reedland then . . . but, this year, Reedland did not have the Big Three to fear. This year, Reedland would win back the coveted championship—win it back in crushing fashion. And also atone for the "camping trip" defeat!

In less than five minutes after the start of the game, Tim Norton, Reedland star, was over Milford's line for a touchdown. The two thousand Reedland rooters went wild as their fullback added the extra point after touch-

down on a kick from placement. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick looked at one another sadly.

"Gee, this is going to be a tough game to watch!" breathed Pepper, between gritted teeth.

Resisting sluggishly, Milford half-heartedly sought to stem the next Reedland advance. But slowly and relentlessly Reedland pounded away, now through the line . . . now around the ends . . . now shooting a short forward pass . . . little yard-eating gains. There were hope-raising cheers from Milford as their team braced inside the fifteen yard line and held the foe for downs . . . and Kline, substitute fullback, got off a forty yard punt. But the Milford spectators lost their spark of enthusiasm as Reedland again took up the march, Tim Norton doing much of the execution. As the whistle blew calling time for the first quarter, Reedland—leading by a 7 to 0 score, had pushed the ball to Milford's seven yard stripe and a first down. Oh, there was a merciless slaughter coming!

But, in the brief minutes between quarters, a great wondering murmur passed through the crowd. Mr. Harrison Conway, father of Milford's veteran right half, had been sighted

hurrying out upon Brinkley field with a yellow sheet of paper in his hand—in search of Coach Dolan! As the coach and father met, players crowded around, questioningly. Then they were seen to leap about and shout with joy.

"What's up? Tell us!" roared the thousands on the sidelines. Slim Mooney, yell leader, hurried over to consult the coach. Everybody in the stands stood up, excitedly.

"Evidently Conway's been found," said Pepper, relieved.

"It—it must be something more than that," surmised Stuffy. "Look!"

Slim Mooney tossed his megaphone into the air and turned several handsprings. Then he picked the megaphone up and raced toward the stands.

"The Big Three!" he cried. "Where's the Big Three? They've been *reinstated!*"

A tremendous din broke out. Spectators near the astounded Stuffy, Pepper and Brick grabbed the boys up bodily and passed them down over the heads of other spectators to the playing field. The ovation given this news was so riotous that the resumption of the game was delayed five minutes. The

members of the Big Three were hustled over to Coach Dolan where fellow players slapped them on the back and hugged them. The coach called the referee over and there was a consultation which apparently developed into an argument. Mr. Conway was seen to tap the yellow sheet of paper significantly but the referee shook his head firmly, then turned and blew his whistle, calling time. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick, at a word from the coach, left Brinkley field on the run.

"Yea, Big Three! Yea! Yea! Yea!" boomed the Milfordites after them.

The large Reedland contingent looked on appreciatively, and to show that they were in sympathy, joined in with: "Good for you, Big Three! Good for you!" Reedland was anxious to let Milford know that their town was not made up of George Farrars.

Dressing feverishly in the Milford High locker room after a wild auto ride to the school, the three chums had barely time for a few, almost incoherent comments.

"Did you get the straight of the thing?" asked Stuffy, as he yanked a jersey on over his head.

"That's just the trouble!" ranted Pepper,

fumbling for a shoe. "Nobody's got the straight of the thing . . . Connie's wire was about as intelligent as an eye-testing card. I don't blame the referee for not letting us play until he got better authority than that. I still think Conway's bughouse!"

"Well, all I hope is—if he *has* gotten us reinstated—that he gets here with the proof in time to . . . to let us get a crack at Reedland!" fumed Brick. "It'ud be just like his Dad's bus to break down . . .!"

CHAPTER XIV

FOR MILFORD!

Out on Brinkley field a different Milford team was giving battle to Reedland. The Milford fans were wild over Reedland's failing to take the ball across on four desperate tries and Kline's second forty yard punt, putting the home team again out of danger.

"Say, they're fighting now!" cried a frenzied rooter. "There's the *real* Milford!"

"Hold 'em!" begged substitute quarter Fitzgerald. "Hold 'em till the Big Three get in!"

And Milford held . . . held all through the second quarter. Reedland had possession of the ball most of the time but met with increasing difficulty penetrating Milford territory. The fight waged between the forty yard lines of both teams and the pigskin was in midfield when the half ended.

Reedland, 7; Milford, 0.

Between halves, the Big Three, back in football togs, crossed the field to the players' bench, receiving another great outburst of applause.

Mr. Conway, father of the veteran right half, was observed to be pacing anxiously up and down near the team, straining his eyes toward the entrance gate. This mute action was easily translated by the crowd.

"Yea, Conway! Yea, Conway! Yea! Yea! Yea!" they yelled.

Mr. Conway, doffing his hat in recognition of the cheers, shook his head uncertainly and pointed toward the gate.

A groan went up as the third quarter opened with the Big Three still on the sidelines. The crowd did not understand this procedure and began demanding of Coach Dolan that he send his famous trio in. The coach shrugged his shoulders helplessly, then made a dumb show of patting Mr. Conway on the back and pointing toward the gate. Mr. Conway helped with the gesturing . . . and then the crowd got "on."

"Conway's son is coming with written permission for the fellows to play!" divined a spectator. "That's what's holding things up! Wow, this game's getting on my nerves!"

Milford, battling furiously to prevent Reedland from increasing her lead, began actually to develop an offensive of her own. Only one

touchdown behind! If Conway would only turn up so that Milford could throw her full strength into the game! But Conway didn't show up, no matter how many heads craned intreatingly toward the gate . . . and the members of Milford's substitute backfield were driven to the realization that, if anything was done, they would have to do it. It was a praiseworthy attempt these spirited substitutes made, carrying the ball as they did down to Reedland's eleven yard line, only to lose it on a disheartening fumble by Fitzgerald who became too eager with a touchdown in sight. After that, with the quarter almost ended, the substitute backfield—trying hard to retrieve the misfortune—brought the ball back to Reedland's thirty yard line with one down to go and seven yards to make. Reedland was putting up a stiff defense.

"Don't you think we'd better try for a field goal?" asked Fitzgerald of his substitute backs. "We haven't much chance of making our yards again!"

"Right!" assented Captain Beef Mellon who, playing his last game for old Milford, had been a bulwark of strength in the center of the line. "Give Kline a chance to boot her over!"

But Kline never got his chance. As he dropped back into position and raised his hands to receive the pigskin a terrific roar broke out. Captain Mellon immediately called, "Time!"

"It's Conway!" screamed the stands.

A car, with the radiator cap off and steam spouting out the top, had come tearing through the gate and pulled up beside the rows of parked machines, a youth jumping from it and racing toward the sidelines before his wheezing steed had come to a full stop. In his hand he clutched a long, white envelope. He headed straight for the white-clothed figure of the referee and was soon engulfed in a swarm of players. Amid the wildest scenes that Brinkley field had ever seen, Fitzgerald, Kline and Arrick left their positions on the field and came trotting in, passing Stuffy, Pepper and Brick on the way and stopping to shake hands. The something in the long, white envelope had convinced the referee, and the reinstatement of the Big Three to athletic competition was now complete!

Surrounded by a circle of substitutes, the veteran right half stripped off his civilian clothes and donned football togs rushed from

the locker room in anticipation of his arrival. An overjoyed father watched the quick change as the game was resumed.

"Yea, Big Three! Yea, Yea, Yea!"

Milford's last down, seven yards to go, the third quarter fifty seconds from its finish.

Stuffy, taking Kline's place, prepared for a try at a field goal as the substitute fullback had intended. The ball snapped back. He caught the pigskin deftly and dropped it to meet his upswinging toe. The line held. And the Milford crowd indulged in joyous hysterics as the ball skimmed over the bar for Milford's first scoring of the game.

Reedland, 7; Milford, 3.

Quarter over!

A frenzy of excitement prevailed while the two teams were changing ends of the field. Could Milford do it? Milford was still as good as a touchdown behind. And Reedland had presented the most stubborn sort of opposition. It was evident that the visiting eleven would throw every resource into a defense of their slight lead rather than to jeopardize that lead by any very extensive offense. Reedland again had a championship within her grasp. This time she would hold it!

Merle Conway came onto the field to relieve Phillpot who had filled his berth at right half, and the Milfordites gave the veteran such a welcoming as he would remember to his dying day. The Big Three gathered about Conway, arms over each other's shoulders.

"How in Sam Hill did you do it?" asked Stuffy, warmly.

"Went after Farrar," narrated Conway, tersely. "He runs a cigar store in Reedland. I got there while he was waiting on trade . . . overheard a few things . . . made me suspicious . . . I stalled around awhile . . . . heard him talking to some men about Reedland and Milford . . . heard him say it was all fixed . . . that Reedland would win hands down . . . Well, there's not time to tell it all now . . . but I got the dope on him . . . learned he placed heavy bets on his home team . . . and I threatened to expose him if he didn't come across . . . withdraw his protest . . . and come clean with the state board. He tried to kidnap me and hold me till after the game to-day . . . but I broke away . . . made things hot . . . got the police behind me . . . beat it for the state capitol with

Farrar's confession . . . got the secretary of the State Football Association busy on the wire . . . reached the members of the Athletic Board by long distance phone . . . got their vote on a reinstatement . . . had the secretary make it official . . . then hit the road for home in a race against time. What do you mean—it was too late to do anything?"

Stuffy, Pepper and Brick embraced Conway affectionately.

"You're a wonder!" said Pepper, his voice breaking queerly.

"I told you I couldn't play unless you fellows played, too," reminded Conway. "There's the whistle! Let's go—for Milford!"

At that moment a low vibratory whir was heard. Spectators turned heads aloft, questioningly. And then a great white bird was sighted, flying low over the housetops beyond the field, swooping lower . . . lower . . . seeming to clear the stand by less than a hundred feet! Spellbound, Milford and Reedland watched while the plane banked sharply so that the aviator in the cockpit could be plainly seen. Stuffy, Pepper and Brick stood entranced, gazing upward. Suddenly Stuffy grabbed Brick's arm.

"Gee whiz!" he gasped. "Can you *beat* that? It's *Lieutenant Alden!*"

Brick grinned, a tingling feeling at his temples.

"He didn't forget, did he? So *this* is the way he accepts our invitation to the game! What a grandstand seat *he* has!"

The aviator leaned out, waving his hand to the players on the field, then dipped the nose of his plane in a graceful gesture at the Milford goal and circled the field once more as the Milford crowd returned his greeting with a tumultuous roar.

"Oh, boy—we've just *got* to win after *this!*" breathed Stuffy, as the flyer who had helped Milford defeat Reedland in the great camping combat, winged his departure. The whole spectacular incident had taken less than two minutes.

And now the attention of the crowd came back to the game with renewed frenzy. Play had already been interrupted beyond the regulation time-out. The referee's whistle screeched vigorously. Tim Norton, Reedland captain, raised his arm to signify that Reedland was ready. The Milford line stiffened as Stuffy ran forward to boot the ball.

WITH A CLEAR FIELD IN SIGHT, CONWAY SLIPPED AND FELL.

"Yea, Milford! Fight 'em! Fight 'em! Fight 'em!"

Reedland received the kick-off and carried the ball to mid-field, then punted deep into Milford territory. The Milfordites cheered mightily as the Big Three went into action for the first time. Stuffy ripped off six yards on the opening play; Conway shot through a hole manufactured by Captain Mellon for six more yards and a first down. Pepper was a human dynamo, running up and down the line, exhorting the linemen to "get in there!" . . . "snap it up" . . . "give us a little help, won't you?" . . . and the linemen, responding valiantly, smashed gaping breaches in the Reedland forward wall. But, the further Milford advanced, the stiffer Reedland's resistance became. On Reedland's thirty-five yard line Milford needed four yards to make a first down. Pepper, without hesitancy, called upon Conway. And the veteran right half, straining to come through, slipped and fell on rounding the end, with a clear field in sight. He gained but two yards and the ball went over.

"Tough luck, Con, old man!" sympathized Pepper.

But Conway, sobbing, could not answer.

It was a bad break in the game. The last quarter was more than half over and Reedland, once more in possession of the ball, would try to hold it as long as possible . . . to thwart Milford's chances of again threatening their goal.

"Come on, gang, get that ball back for Conway!" called Captain Mellon. "For Conway and me . . . it's our last game for old Milford! Come on, gang!"

It was such a struggle as left the spectators spellbound . . . hoping . . . praying . . . screaming . . .!

And then Reedland was forced to punt—with four minutes of the game remaining—a punt which carried to Milford's twenty-one yard line. Conway, catching the punt, dropped in behind an interference formed by the Big Three. Over the muddled chalkmarks he ran, taking a zig-zag course to avoid eager tacklers. Stuffy blocked off two men; Brick accounted for two more . . . and Pepper and Conway went on alone . . . the crowd setting up a tremendous din. On Reedland's thirty yard mark, after a marvelous open field run of fifty yards, the veteran right half was brought heavily to earth, Pepper being spilled

with him. But his run had placed Milford once more within scoring range.

"Touchdown!" begged Milford. "Touchdown!"

Stuffy was good for four yards around end. Brick made it first down with eight. Ball on Reedland's eighteen yard line. Pepper dodged through for three. Conway ripped off four. Brick brought another first down with three. Ball on Reedland's eight yard line. Reedland clawing the air and holding frantically.

"Come on, gang!" intreated Captain Mellon. "For Conway and me!"

Wild-eyed, Pepper looked about him. The drive had been taxing on the endurance of the backfield. Stuffy and Brick and Conway were breathing heavily, lurching in their positions. Whom should he call on? There was less than a minute of play . . . and still eight yards to go . . . eight yards that seemed like eight miles!

"Signals . . .!"

The ball went to Brick because he had seemed to have been the most effective ground-gainer. Brick carried it two yards nearer.

"Signals . . .!"

Pepper knew instinctively that there would

be time for but one more play. He had relied mainly on straight football . . . and straight football was all that had been necessary . . . but the time—the time . . .! It was the time that was beating them! If this next play failed—

"Signals . . . eleven . . . *twelve* . . . five . . ."

"Signals over!" shrieked Conway, starting forward.

But his cry came too late. The ball had already been passed. Pepper jammed it into the protesting Conway's stomach as he came through, with Brick shoving him from behind. Pepper had called the play for right halfback through the center position . . . and that is just where the right half went—Captain Mellon having thrown his weight in one last, gigantic lunge against the opposing line . . . cracking it wide apart. He lay on the bottom of the heap as the feet of his own teammates trampled over him. He lay for a moment . . . blinking . . . and hoping. Then came the greatest din of all. Captain Mellon's broad, mud-spattered face grew broader still as it relaxed into a happy grin.

"Good boy, Con!" he called, without looking up.

What matter if Stuffy did miss the kick after touchdown? The scoreboard read, Milford, 9; Reedland, 7, and this, according to Milford's way of thinking, was an entirely satisfactory margin to win by.

As the Big Three and Conway were being carried off the field on the shoulders of a jubilant mob, the veteran right half shouted across to Pepper.

"Say—that was one time I didn't want to carry the ball . . . and you gave it to me . . .!"

"And look what you did with it!" kidded Pepper. "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

The retort was humorously intended but it seemed to strike a human keynote.

"We're all ashamed of ourselves!" spoke up one of the team-members.

"Oh, well—papa will forgive you if you promise never, never to get the big head again!" called out Slim Mooney, school wit, and from the expressions on the faces of all concerned, it looked very much like a squad of deliriously happy Milfordites would be searching for smaller hats.

THE END

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